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"THERE'S NEVER BEEN A BETTER TIME TO HEED THE CALL OF FFXIV"

This month
Decided that retiring to the French countryside with *Final Fantasy XIII* heroine Lightning sounds pretty darn good. Chardonnay, Camembert, chocobos... what's not to like?

Final Fantasy XIV is now ten years old and, joyously, it shows no signs of stopping any time soon. For *Final Fantasy* fans like myself (as well as a lot of the PC PowerPlay crew), we're living our questing, raiding, and chocobo-riding dreams.

And, with *FFXIV*'s epic new expansion, *Dawntrail*, dropping in winter 2024, PC gamers are about to be welcomed to explore an entire new world. With new lands, cities, jobs, dungeons, threats, gear, activities and more on offer, there's never been a better time to heed the call of *FFXIV*.

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BEN MANSILL
EDITOR
ben.mansill@futurenet.com

The PC PowerPlay team

TYLER COLP

This month
Visited a haunted moon with a couple of buds. Got torn apart by space bees. Plus ça change.

LAUREN MORTON

This month
Watched video clips of Studio Ghibli food scenes on loop. Missed many, many deadlines.

SEAN MARTIN

This month
Set up an underground fight club for *Palworld* fans. The only rule of *Palworld* fight club is...

TED LITCHFIELD

This month
Mused on if he should augment himself with robot arms. Decided he's too hench already.

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All the finest PC gear as rated by the tech experts at PC PowerPlay

BLAME JOEL

HELLDIVERS 2 is controlled by one mysterious man

H*elldivers 2*'s galactic war is much more than a mission selector. In a short time, players have become invested in the status of their favourite planets and reacted to gains and losses in a sector's liberation. The simulated conflict has become an unexpected focal point of the *Helldivers 2* experience.

Unexpected to players, that is. To developer Arrowhead Game Studios, the war is a product of planning and storytelling by a specific behind-the-scenes individual pulling the strings: what Arrowhead CEO Johan Pilestedt described to PC PowerPlay as *Helldivers 2*'s 'dungeon master'.

"We have an actual person with the job title of game master," Pilestedt told PC PowerPlay. His name is Joel, and he takes his job very seriously. "We have a lot of systems built into the game where the game master has a lot of control over the play

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS HAS BEEN A MAJOR INSPIRATION FOR ARROWHEAD

experience. It's something that we're continuously evolving based on what's happening in the game," Pilestedt continued.

Pilestedt says Dungeons & Dragons has been a major inspiration for Arrowhead. The studio aims to replicate the reactive storytelling of tabletop gaming in *Helldivers 2*. "It's the same format when you build that for millions of players, it's just that you can't get as personal with every individual. But you can still do the same twists and turns."

Those twists can be as granular as giving a specific player access to a special stratagem mid-mission to spice things up, but it also extends to

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WHITE OUT

BETTER IN BEIGE

Noctua is ditching white fans. It's instead choosing to focus all its efforts on its next-gen 140mm fans currently nine years in the making. The company says it doesn't know if white will ever be back on the roadmap. No biggie, its beige and brown option is already perfect – don't @ me. ■ *JR*

BIG N-EWS

YUZU WON'T BELIEVE THIS

Nintendo launched a massive lawsuit against popular Switch emulator Yuzu. The devs behind the emulator capitulated, agreeing to pay "monetary relief in the sum of $2.4 million," cease development, hand over domains and even cancel development of 3DS emulator Citra. It's dead, Jim. ■ *RS*

RUNESCAPE, NOT EIGHT

I NEED TO SEE SOME ID

Jagex staff were briefly baffled when they woke up to find their Twitter (X) account straight-up banned. Turns out, Twitter's automated systems thought the account (which has over 300,000 followers) was in fact made by an eight-year-old child back in 2009. Just to clear things up: it wasn't. ■ *HR*

TOP: Players are valiantly defending against Joel's sly tricks.

ABOVE: Joel has played puppetmaster to *Helldivers 2*'s entire war so far.

larger narrativised events in the galactic war. We got our first taste of those a week after launch, when the offensive campaign against the Terminids was interrupted by Automaton invasions on the opposite end of the galaxy.

FUTURE UPDATES

Arrowhead says it has "predictions" about how the war will play out and has devised "set-pieces" that it thinks will be significant, but in true tabletop fashion, the story will change based on player behaviour. In fact, it already has. Joel has already had to grease the wheels for the enemy a few times when players proved a little too efficient at spreading liberty.

"There have been some sudden moments where maybe one planet was too easy or one was too hard and [Joel] had to get up in the middle of the night to give the Automatons a bit of reinforcement so the players don't take [the planet] too quickly," says Pilestedt.

As Arrowhead turns its attention to future updates, the community looks toward the next chapter of the war. With the Automaton invasion coming to a close, will Arrowhead direct helldivers back to the bugs? Considering the recent discovery of mechs and their production facilities, perhaps we'll soon be returning to the Terminid front with new hardware. ■

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Share the love
Larian won big at the DICE Awards, and used its speech to speak out against layoffs.

Incognito mode
Steam has launched a 'Mark as Private' function, letting you hide your more, ahem, delicate games.

Space Quest
NASA has released a tabletop game that asks: what if a dragon stole the Hubble Space Telescope?

Low blow
Unionised YouTube workers were told they'd been laid off in the middle of a live-broadcast Austin City Council meeting.

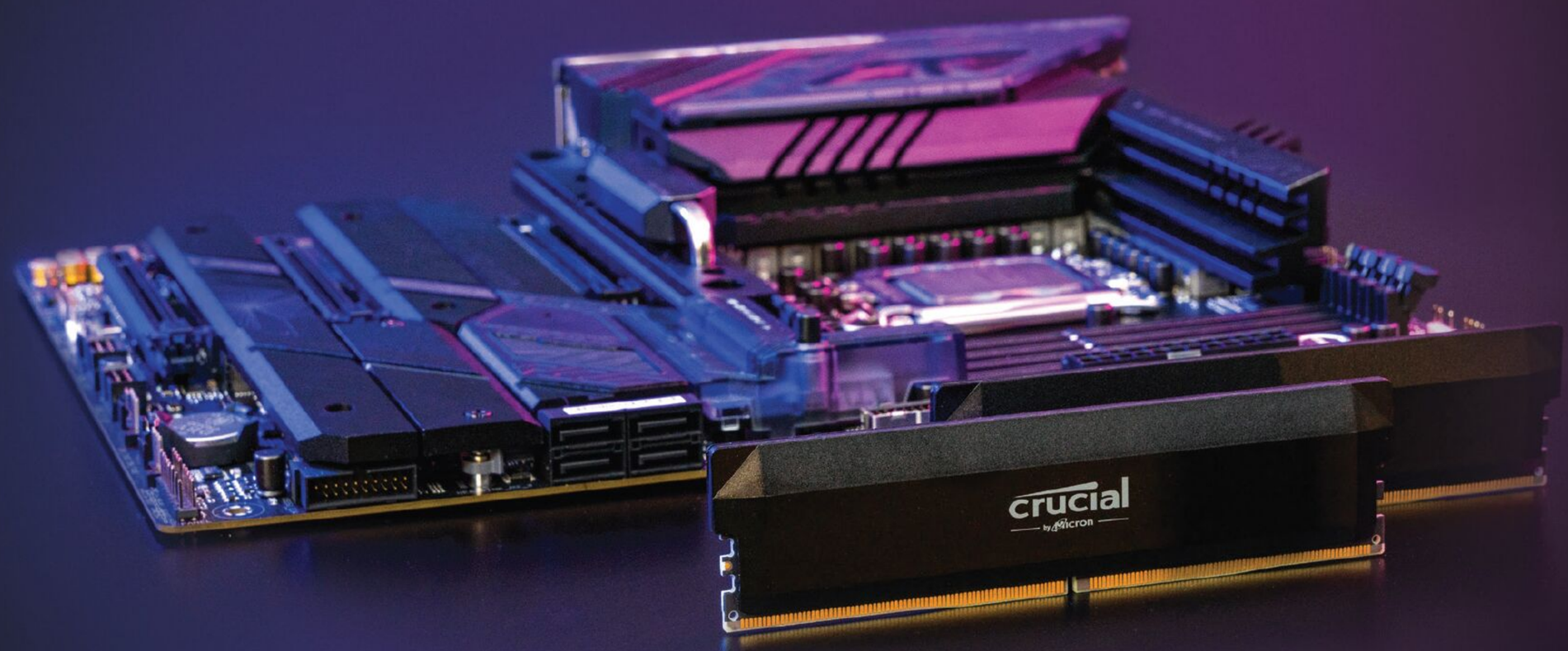
Out of the game
EA let go of five percent of its workforce in February.

Cursed Tomb
Tomb Raider I-III Remastered on the Epic Store was mysteriously better than every other version, until Aspyr yanked it offline.

LOWS

Every build needs a powerful foundation

crucial by Micron



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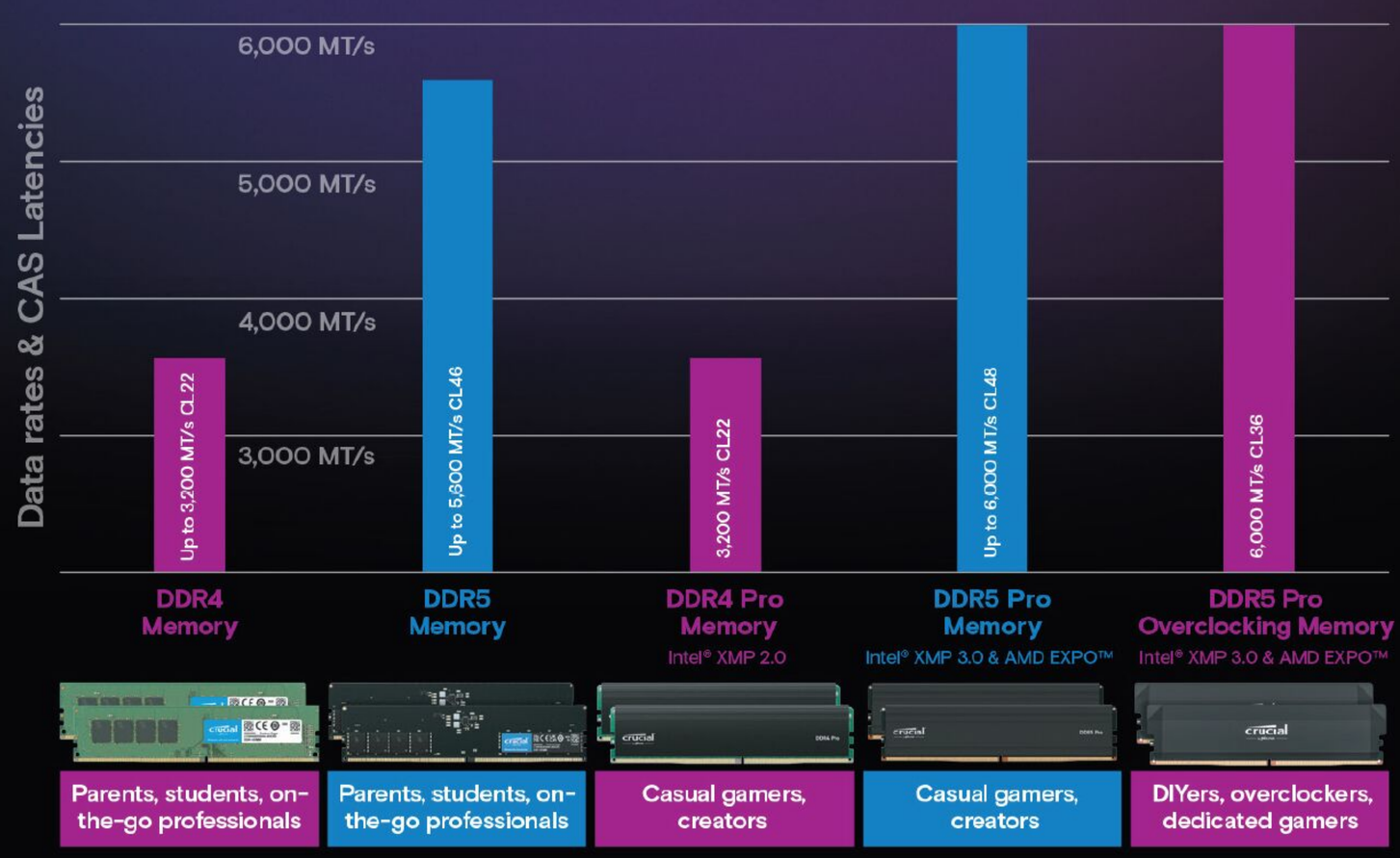

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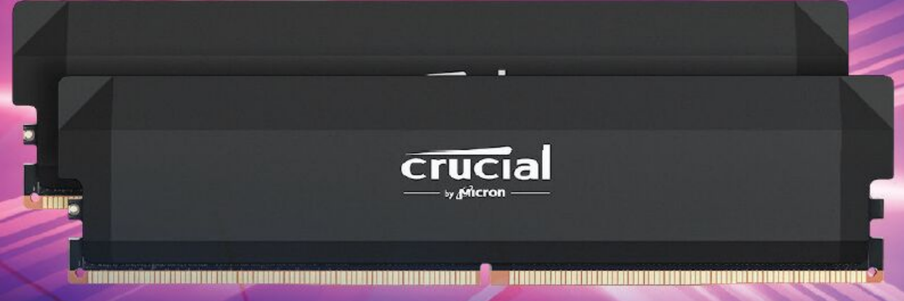

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The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

People overestimate the importance of getting into things. "Oh, we ended up in the VIP lounge," you humblebrag to your colleague, as they silently regret asking what you did over the weekend. "Oh, we've bought a timeshare in the Maldives," you enthuse to your sister, her forced smile betraying her impatience with how irresponsible you're being with your money. "Oh, there was a complex series of steam vents The Spy used to reach the underground volcano base," The Spy tells The Spy's handler, who stares forward impassively, never moving, never blinking, always listening.

The Spy loves a good infiltration as much as the next person, but it's only half the story. What if, after you've arrived, you really, really want to leave? The VIP lounge is loud and tacky. The timeshare is old and dilapidated. The volcano is active and about to blow. Getting in is one thing, it's the exfiltration that really matters.

DOTTED LINE

For instance, imagine you were a game development studio recently acquired by a large holding company that had spent much of the last few years acquiring multiple smaller-tier developers and publishers. "We empower people and companies to unleash their full potential," the holding company declares, which you take to mean they will give you money in order to make the games you want to make. A great deal. You sign on the dotted line.

Now imagine that the holding company failed to secure a $2 billion funding deal – reported to be with Saudi Arabia's Savvy Games Group – and is now downsizing to an unprecedented degree. Things are looking bleak. What's your exit plan?

While you ponder that purely hypothetical question, let's check in with Embracer Group. The Spy would run down its recent history, but for some reason feels like The Spy would be repeating The Spy's self. If recent reports are to be believed, two of its studios are soon to be sold in the wake of continued turmoil and layoffs.

First up is Saber Interactive, which Bloomberg reports will be sold for $500 million to a cabal of private investors. Saber is a full operating group in Embracer's org chart – one of its largest subsidiaries, acting as the parent company for numerous studios including Aspyr, New World Interactive, 4A Games and Tripwire. Upcoming games for the group include the *Knights of the Old Republic* remake – which Bloomberg confirms is still in development despite being "delayed indefinitely" in 2022 – and *Space Marine 2*, which was originally due out in November last year, but has been delayed into the second half of 2024.

THE HOLDING COMPANY FAILED TO SECURE A $2 BILLION FUNDING DEAL

Next, there's Gearbox, which Embracer acquired in 2021 for an eye-watering $1.3 billion. According to a Kotaku report, the publisher is now in the late stages of a sale being finalised, but as yet there are no solid details around who is looking to buy. Gearbox CEO Randy Pitchford responded to the rumour, telling Kotaku he was "delighted that what we might be up to is interesting enough to people that you want to make a story about us for your readers". To The Spy's eye, this is a pro move. Uncomfortable request from a journalist? Always have an exit plan. Spy out. ■

The Spy

THE SPY
The Spy always knows the fastest way out.

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BIG DECK ENERGY

How roguelike deckbuilder **BALATRO** uses poker, without really being poker

As a poker fan I'm always on the lookout for a new poker game. I'm especially keen to find games that use poker in interesting new ways, like RPG *We Slay Monsters* or roguelike *Poker Quest*, both of which use poker hands as their combat system. So, when poker-inspired roguelike deckbuilder *Balatro* came along I was eager to talk to its developer – not just about the game, but also what I assumed would be our shared love of poker.

"It's funny, I don't play poker at all," says LocalThunk, solo developer of *Balatro*. That is pretty funny, actually, because *Balatro* has, well, quite a lot of poker in it. You begin with a standard deck of 52 playing cards, you make poker hands like straights, flushes and full houses to score chips, you compete against bosses called blinds, and when you win a round you come away with cash.

But it wasn't a love of poker that led LocalThunk to create *Balatro*. "The game itself is really more based on Big Two," he says, "which uses poker hands, but you play them out of your hand of eight or 13 cards or something. And so it's based on that game, not poker, but I knew that poker would be a really good thematic tie-in that a lot of people could use as a launching point to understand some of the mechanics in this game.

"I could use the terminology in poker, I could use some of the visuals like blinds and antes and chips, and stuff like that, as a way to kind of make the whole thing feel cohesive, but I don't play poker. I don't really care very much about poker."

FAMILIAR GROUND

As someone who has played over 40 hours of *Balatro* over the past couple months – not the full game, I'm just talking about the free demo – I can attest to the effectiveness of using common playing cards and poker hands as a simple entry into the game. I know the cards, the suits, and the hands, so even on my first try I already understood the basics. I don't play a lot of other deckbuilders, so it usually takes me a while to come to grips with them, even friendly ones like *Slay the Spire*. But with *Balatro*, I immediately felt like I was on familiar ground.

"[That] was done very intentionally because that's something about other games... personally, it turns me off when I play a game and it uses a bunch of terminology like HP and poison damage and experience, those kinds of terms," LocalThunk says. "They're very gamer-y terms, and I don't play games a ton. So, those things to me, they feel like they're adding so many layers of complexity. When I made my game, I wanted to make it so there's no

Top dog

Big Two is a Cantonese card game also called Top Dog, Big Deuce, Deuces, President, or Chinese Poker, but it's more along the lines of Crazy Eights or Cheat. Unlike poker, two is the high card in Big Two (hence the name), not the ace. Straights are called snakes, flushes are called flowers, and a full house is called a gourd.

NO JOKE

A few of my favourite Balatro *jokers*

CREDIT CARD
Out of cash? Charge it to this joker if you don't mind going into debt.

HACK
Every 2, 3, 4, or 5 card you play gets counted twice to rack up extra points.

BLUEPRINT
Copies the joker it's next to. So that 2, 3, 4, and 5 will get counted again...

DNA
Play a single card in your first hand, and it'll give you back a copy of it to keep.

hit points, there's no damage, you're not attacking something. It's almost like solitaire."

Which isn't to say *Balatro* doesn't eventually get pretty complicated. What initially feels like poker quickly becomes something vastly different as you play. After each round you can spend your winnings in a card shop to enhance your standard deck into a bizarre, silly, and occasionally massively overpowered collection of cards. Booster packs add extra playing cards to your deck, tarot cards can morph your deck by letting you copy cards, destroy cards, or change a card's suit. You can buy multipliers to increase the scores of your favourite hands, or turn cards to glass (big points but they may shatter) or give them a seal (which helps your score if you discard them instead of playing them). Before long you may have a dozen aces in your deck, which make it easy to play four or five of a kind, or instead of the standard 13 hearts you may have double or even triple that amount, letting you become a flush machine.

WHAT FEELS LIKE POKER BECOMES SOMETHING VASTLY DIFFERENT

And then there are jokers to buy, the keystones of your *Balatro* strategy. Some add multipliers for every hand you play, some for specific hands, and some let you hold more cards at once or discard more often. Combining certain jokers can lead to high-scoring hands, and plenty of jokers just break the rules of poker altogether, like letting you form flushes and straights with four cards instead of five, or letting you photocopy cards in your hand. The further you get into *Balatro*, the stranger and more powerful your deck becomes, and you'll need that to defeat *Balatro*'s bosses which each have their own rules: limiting you to only one type of hand, dealing your cards face down and worse.

If you watch clips of people playing *Balatro*, you'll see just how gloriously broken decks can get. My personal best is scoring about 35,000 points in a single hand, but some players have created decks that score millions and even billions. "I'm very shocked when that happens because I'm not very good at this game," LocalThunk says. "I do get surprised when people are able to do stuff like that, because I can't."

As for *Balatro*'s origins, it came into existence the way I suspect a lot of games did over the past several years: wanting to connect with friends during Covid.

"I wanted to make an online version of [Big Two] for my friends that we could play during the pandemic," LocalThunk says. "And while I was working on it, I thought, I love the concept of *Luck Be a Landlord*, a roguelike that doesn't have an enemy, and you're just trying to get a really high score. So I thought, I bet I could make that with poker flavour with this engine that I've built." ■

Christopher Livingston

TOP LEFT: Make the right moves and you'll rack up a scorching score.

TOP: Shop for boosters and jokers between rounds to enhance your deck.

DIFFICULTY CURVES

Game designer **JOHN DENNIS** explains how to get difficulty balancing right

Before entering game development, John Dennis was "an art teacher who really didn't enjoy teaching!" as he puts it. A friend who was working at Team 17 encouraged him to apply for a game designer job there, which, after some hesitation, he did. "I was the first game designer they'd had."

Though at the beginning he wasn't sure precisely what a game designer did, he was clearly a quick learner. He stayed at Team 17 for 15 years, and had advanced to the level of head of design, leading a team of 14, by the time he left. After a few years at Activision, he moved on to working with New Star Games and Five Aces, where he's been for the past ten years.

The game he worked on for Activision was the mobile *CoD* game *Call of Duty: Strike Team*. Balancing difficulty for that involved a combination of things that may seem obvious, such as enemy health and accuracy, enemy effectiveness at taking cover and so on. As a racing game, *New Star GP* involves different variables, but the principle is the same.

"We knew we wanted different tyre types," says Dennis. "We knew we wanted fuel load, and for the fuel to affect the handling of the car. We knew we wanted dynamic weather in races. We knew we wanted component damage. The original concept for the career was that you'll start racing in the 1980s and race all the way up to the 2020s. Each decade of racing will be more difficult than the last one. The tracks will get longer and more technical, the opponents will get harder. And also we'll make the economy slightly tighter as well. The first decade will be very generous with the money, and it gets slightly tighter as we go."

TYRE YELLOW RIBBON

This is the highly effective method of introducing elements to learn at an early stage (eg tyre wear) which become more important as the game progresses.

On top of that, *New Star GP* also uses adaptive difficulty. "If you beat [AI opponents] by a lot, for example, they jump up their performance curve more than they would if the race is very, very tight. Certainly in the earlier decades of racing, they might step back a bit and go, 'We're probably a little too far ahead of the player at this point.'"

Dennis shows me graphs of AI performance across the game's decades, used to produce a literal difficulty curve. As each decade becomes more difficult, the adaptive element becomes less forgiving. During the Early Access period however, with only the first few decades available, some players wanted more of a challenge. A Pro difficulty was added, which makes things more difficult by dialling the adaptive element all the way down to produce AI opponents that want to win regardless of your performance.

But how do developers know that they've gauged the difficulty correctly? For *New Star GP*, this involved feedback from volunteers prior to the Early Access release. Another method, which Dennis used during his time at Team 17, is usability testing. "We used to have a little room," he explains, "where we'd set up the game with a monitor and a mirror. Behind the test subjects we'd have a video camera, and we'd set them a bunch of tasks. We would leave the room at that point. And what we'd have on the video, because of the mirror, [was] the face of the person playing the game. So you'd see if they were angry, or frustrated, or laughing."

Testers would answer questions, but the footage could reveal something the respondent was unable or unwilling to say. Dennis gives the example of somebody who was clearly frustrated while trying out a game, but was reluctant to tell the developers that. "You get an honest and unfiltered sort of feedback that you wouldn't otherwise get." ■

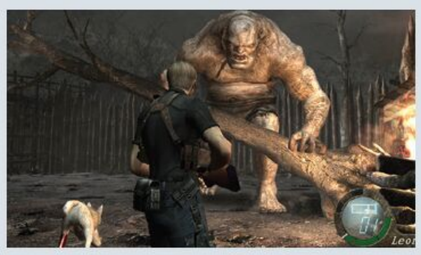
Luke Kemp

HARD TO HARD

Four different approaches to difficulty

DARK SOULS
Featuring a difficulty cliff rather than a curve, the *Souls* series is about learning from mistakes.

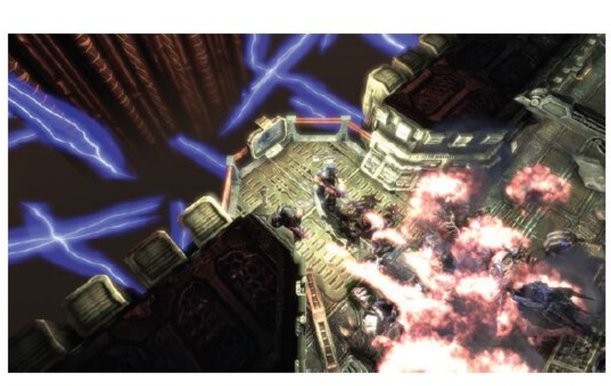
SUPER MEAT BOY
Short levels mean losing little progress, and success is an adrenaline rush.



RESIDENT EVIL 4
You can choose your difficulty, but there's also an adaptive element affecting ammo drops.

POWERWASH SIMULATOR
Sometimes, it's hard to qualify the difficulty of a game. It can be more about goals that you set.

"THE TRACKS WILL GET LONGER AND MORE TECHNICAL, THE OPPONENTS WILL GET HARDER"



ABOVE: Cheery retro-style graphics, sure, but *New Star GP* can get as tough as you like.

FAR LEFT: You'll see a lot of the pits in *NSGP* – if you want to win...

LEFT: *Call of Duty: Strike Team*, which Dennis helped design, was an ambitious iOS game with first and third-person perspectives.

Incoming

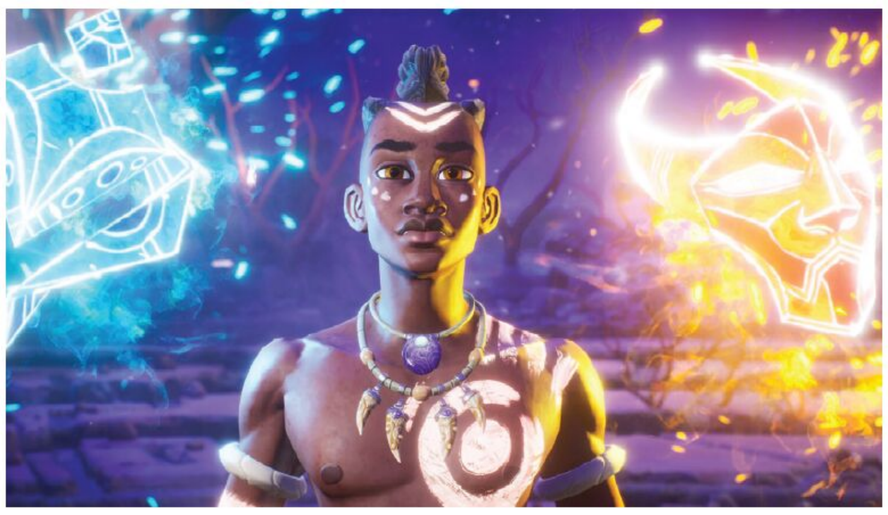
THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

EUROPA

RELEASE April 16, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Novadust Entertainment

A Studio Ghibli-inspired adventure-puzzler, PC gamers play as android Zee as he solves the mysteries of a fallen utopia. Looks promising.



TALES OF KENZERA: ZAU

RELEASE April 23, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Surgent Studios

A Bantu-inspired Metroidvania in which you must try to reclaim the spirit of your father in the beautiful but treacherous land of Kenzera.

HOMEWORLD 3

RELEASE May 13, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Blackbird Interactive

Another delay has seen the much-anticipated third game in the beloved sci-fi RTS to fall back to a mid-May release date. Keep the faith.

3 months

SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE II

RELEASE May 21, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Ninja Theory

The long-awaited sequel to the award-winning original *Hellblade*, Senna's Saga sees Senua return in a brutal journey of survival through Viking Iceland.

STAR WARS OUTLAWS

RELEASE 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Massive Entertainment

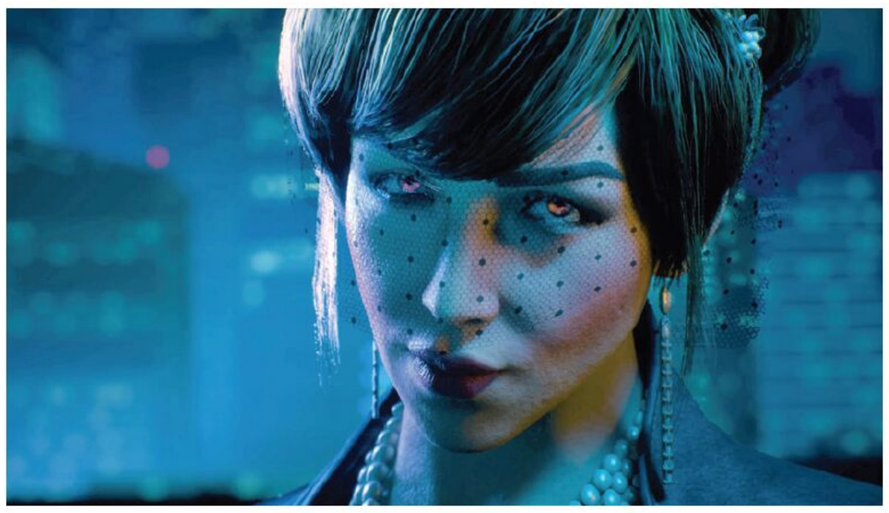
What's looking like the biggest *Star Wars* game of 2024, *Outlaws* see you play as rogue scoundrel Kay Vess in an open-world adventure set in the Outer Rim.

FROSTPUNK 2

RELEASE 2024 | **DEVELOPER** 11 bit studios

We were intrigued by the sequel to the hit society survival game, *Frostpunk*, at Gamescom. Difficult decisions and deep strategy await the player in this grim world.

6 months



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE Autumn 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, *Bloodlines 2* now rises from *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* dev The Chinese Room, and there's even a trailer.

STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

RELEASE September 5, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** GSC Game World

The long-delayed *STALKER 2* has slipped again to early September this year. But from what we've played so far the wait is going to be well worth it.

WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

RELEASE September 9, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Saber Interactive

Saber Interactive has been given a full extra year to make sure that Titus' return against the relentless Tyranid hordes will be a triumphant one.

12 months+

GTA VI

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Rockstar Studios

Everything we're hearing right now points to the next *Grand Theft Auto* launching in 2025. But whether or not that includes PC is unknown.

MONSTER HUNTER WILDS

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Capcom

The famous virtual monster hunting series returns once more in 2025, promising the "pinnacle of excellence in hunting action gameplay".

BLADE

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Arkane Lyon

From the talented devs who brought PC gamers both *Prey* and the *Dishonored* series, Marvel's daywalker is set for a mature, singleplayer, third-person adventure game.

YOUR BEST PAL

If you've dived into the definitely-not-a-*Pokémon* game that is *Palworld*, then this top-rated mod looks like a must download. *The Pal Analyser*, which is the most popular mod on Nexus Mods' *Palworld* hub, displays details and stats about wild pals by just hovering your cursor over them. It's customisable, too. Grab it here: tinyurl.com/2s4m7phh

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
April 26

DEVELOPER
Slavic Magic

PUBLISHER
Hooded Horse

LINK
manorlords.com

MANOR LORDS

City building with epic battles in a game laying siege to Steam

Ah, the life of a medieval central-European peasant. Untroubled by the taste of Doritos or the mental anguish over whether to buy a Steam Deck or not, their only cares in life were where their pigs had got to and the constant threat of dying in a thousand imaginatively grisly ways.

No wonder they're such great fodder for videogames. *Manor Lords* contains many such peasants, doing wholesome things such as ploughing with oxen and planing trees down into timber, but also features spearmen, disease and the leading cause of death among the common people of the time: lords of the manor.

Despite its developer's inspiration from actual historical events, *Manor Lords* isn't set in any particular time period. And in contrast to a certain other game in this magazine's preview section this month, it doesn't look like you'll be able to take modern weapons with you into combat – although there's always hope for the revival of that cheat code for the original *Age of Empires* that brought lasers and nuclear missiles to the party. What this does mean is that the brutality of medieval weapons will be to the fore, as will laying siege to castles.

"Castles, sieges and siege engines are a fairly iconic part of the time period, and I have some grand plans for the implementation of these aspects," says Greg Styczeń, the one-man dev team behind the game. "I've previously showcased how some of the systems might work, and some of them were even in-game for testing at various points of development. I'm not yet sure how much of it will be available to play with at launch, and how much will be added during the Early Access period instead."

Manor Lords is releasing into Steam Early Access, GOG and Game Pass' Game Preview in April, and currently stands at two million wish-listings on Valves' service. "When we first launched the announcement trailer in 2020, my girlfriend said she expected me to get 7,000 wishlists," says Styczeń. "I was more optimistic and said it would be more like 14,000 and that would be awesome. I did not expect the game to pick up so much interest and hit over two million."

YOU'LL BE ABLE TO ZOOM RIGHT IN WHILE PLAYING IT AS A CITY BUILDER

PLAYED IT

PEACE OUT

This unexpected popularity has brought a level of scrutiny to the game that it's doing well to stand up to. The quality of its visuals, particularly in the motion-captured battle scenes and Quixel megascan photogrammetry used for its buildings, means it stands out. Despite the battle scenes being viewed as if from a *Total War* game, you'll be able to zoom right in while playing it as a city builder – and you don't even need to do any fighting.

"There's a non-combat mode in the game," Styczeń says, "and it's fully supported as a viable way to play for those who want to avoid the real-time combat mechanics. There are a few different win conditions that players can pursue, with or without combat. Players will be able to tweak the presence of bandits and the aggression of enemy lords right down to zero if they'd like, focusing instead on the challenges of supply chain management, harsh weather, and the rising demands of a growing population."

The game has recently seen its artwork updated as it nears launch, leading to Styczeń bringing in outside help. Despite this, it remains largely a one-man operation, "I still work on the game on my own, but I have enlisted the services of a company to help with QA, for example, and I have some freelancers for in-game models. I also have a core group of volunteers who've helped me with getting historical details as accurate as possible.

Manor Lords

"The new key art you see, designed by my friend Wojtek, is the culmination of the many adjustments the community directly and indirectly helped bring about. In the early days of development, I kept things fairly loose, inspired by both France and England between the 11th and 15th centuries, and I've been fortunate to have a community that pointed out opportunities for better historical accuracy and focus across everything from architecture to armaments."

This has led to a consistent look for the game, which helps inform its sense of place and feeds back into new artwork and models that are produced. "Beyond art," says Styczeń, "the community has been an integral part of testing the game throughout development, and I've often turned to peoples' thoughts on various mechanics and experiments along the way to see what like-minded individuals hope for in a game like this."

MULEPOWERED

Other additions are constantly coming to the game too, with new features being patched in as quickly as Styczeń can work on them. "I've added so many new things, big and small," he says. "I recently prototyped pack mules to help move goods between regions, and I think they're very cute." There could be an engine update in the future as well. The game is being built in the Unreal Engine 4, but with version 5 producing some quality games, Styczeń is considering making the jump. "This is mostly due to improvements done to the engine that are unavailable for UE4. However, any major change at this stage can be very disruptive to development."

The game certainly looks like an ideal platform for mods, bringing the possibility of Vikings vs aliens or special forces vs dinosaurs, and Styczeń is considering it: "Modding is certainly doable, it's just a matter of what I should focus on at this time, I decided it can be worked on later after all the features are complete."

The game's subreddit is already seeing calls for mods to narrow things down to one particular historical period, but Styczeń has ensured this has remained vague: "Initially, I wasn't too obsessed with the historical side of things – I just wanted to make a fun game, and a 'generic medieval' setting was good enough for me," he says. "But in the earliest days of development, the game lacked that special 'something' that I was looking for, and it always seemed a bit fake. I had the great fortune of being surrounded by people who were much better informed than me on the subject matter, and that's when I started to notice the little things – tropes, weird armour proportions, timber framing that simply doesn't make sense. Before I knew it, I couldn't look at a medieval game the same way again.

"So I decided to ground myself in reality as much as possible," he continues. "A lot of my initial inspiration had already been taken from this specific time and region, so I decided to really double down and embrace it, allowing it to influence everything from architecture to fashion."

WAR FOR TERRITORY

More changes are planned for the game's maps, or rather map. There's only one, but it's quite large and allows seamless travel across it. "I've been establishing the sweet spot where players can establish themselves within their starting region, but are compelled to expand to adjacent regions for a variety of reasons, collecting and spending influence to do so," says Styczeń. But he's not stopping there: "I've been tweaking and adjusting map size and subdivision size throughout development. There's a whole cascade of implications, so at times I've been tempted to make the maps larger, and at times smaller."

Styczeń's influences for the game outside of the medieval period are pretty clear, with the trailers showing mounted knights and other types of troops, some of which will be patched in after release. "I played a lot of older RTS games when I was younger: *Stronghold: Crusader*, *Battle for Middle-earth*, *Knight and Merchants*, *Settlers*, and yeah even *Age of Empires*," says Styczeń. "These games inspired me to create an RTS of my own, which is partly how *Manor Lords* came to be."

While a playable version of the game has yet to be released at the time of writing, we can glean much about *Manor Lords* from the trailers that have been released. It's good to see a medieval city builder get such a buzz behind it weeks before release, and the thought of sending all those peasants into battle... err... protecting those villagers from knights like a good lord should is an alluring one for a summer spent in the Middle Ages.

Ian Evenden

MORE CHANGES ARE PLANNED FOR THE GAME'S MAPS, OR MAP. THERE'S ONLY ONE

ABOVE: There's a hint of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* about the medieval setting.

LEFT: Move the camera close to get stuck into real-time battles.

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Key Specs: Viewable Size: 31.5in; Resolution: 4K (3840 x 2160); Panel: 3rd Gen QD-OLED; Refresh rate: 240Hz; Response time: 0.03 ms (GTG); Brightness (Max): 450cd/Đ; Brightness (100% APL): 250cd/Đ; Colour: 99% DCI-P3; Ports: 2x HDMI 2.1, DisplayPort 1.4, Type-C (90W output); Warranty: 3 years (includes OLED panel burn-in).

THE OLED FUTURE IS NOW

SAY HELLO TO THIS INCREDIBLE GAMING MONITOR, COMBINING ASUS ROG EXPERTISE WITH A NEXT GENERATION QD-OLED PANEL.

Rarely has a new technology been as hotly anticipated in the gaming world as the latest QD-OLED displays. OLED tech has been available for quite some time now, and so it would be easy to underestimate how big an impact these 3rd gen QD-OLED panels will have – especially for gaming.

OLEDs screens are much loved by all, though are especially coveted by gamers for their amazingly low response times, and ability to handle high refresh rates, yet still give vibrant colours and deep blacks. But even with major improvements over the past few years, OLED screens have still been saddled with key limitations, such as burn in, lower pixel densities, and lack the text rendering sharpness needed for non gaming use.

EVERYTHING, ALL IN ONE

Now thanks to Asus, the game has changed. The ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM takes a cutting edge QD-OLED panel from Samsung, paired with loads of gamer-focused features and a cyberpunk inspired aesthetic. The result is stunning, and it's one of the first OLED gaming screens that avoids the downsides of previous generations. Pixel density is up, and we are finally getting a 4K, 3840 x 2160 resolution OLED in a highly practical 32in form factor, and one that also offers the benefits of high refresh rates and extremely low pixel response times.

Just as importantly, the PG32UCDM panel features a much more refined subpixel structure that gives the sharpness and text rendering needed for a monitor that isn't just for gaming.

The new QD-OLED tech combined with upgraded protection features mean the screen is so much more resistant to image retention that Asus backs it with a three year warranty that includes coverage for burn-in, giving you the confidence to game on.

RECAP: QD-OLED 101

You might be wondering, what does the QD in QD-OLED stand for again? Rather than the LCD colour filters over subpixels used in normal OLEDs, QD-OLEDs use Quantum Dots over blue OLED subpixels. The quantum dots efficiently absorb the blue light, and remit it as red or green. Each QD-OLED pixel has red, green and blue subpixels clustered together to create different colours. The third gen panels use advanced manufacturing techniques to squeeze the near 8.3 million pixels closer together than ever before, with a new subpixel layout.

ASUS ROG SWIFT OLED PG32UCDM

Next gen QD-OLED and a 4K resolution in a 32in frame is great and all, but what about the rest of the spec? The panel is 31.5in viewable (699.48 x 394.73 mm), with a 16:9 aspect ratio and an anti-reflection surface. Pixel pitch is a tight 0.182mm, panel brightness is up to 450cd/

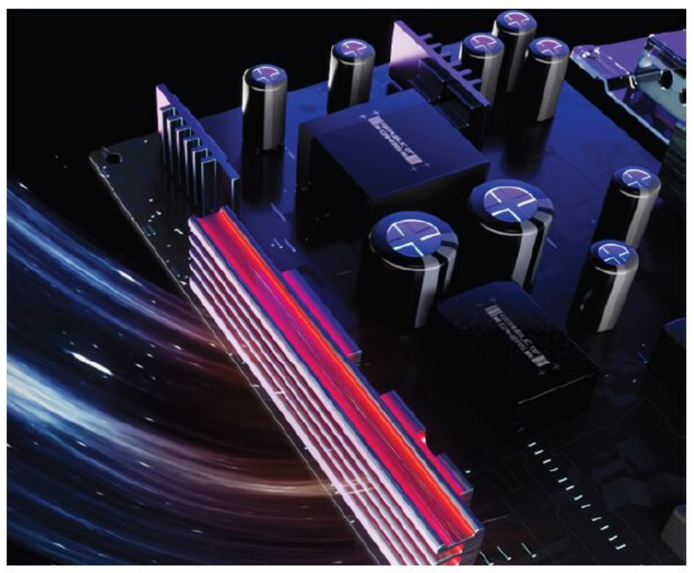
m2, (L) with a 1,500,000:1 contrast ratio, VESA DisplayHDR True Black 400, Dolby Vision*, HDR10 support and 178°/ 178° view angles. The screen can display true 10 bit colour, and covers a top notch 99% of the DCI-P3 colour space with an impressive colour accuracy of Delta E < 2. And of course for buttery smooth gaming you get the high end 240Hz refresh rate (G-sync Compatible and FreeSync Premium Pro), ELMB and that gloriously low 0.03ms (GTG) pixel response time.

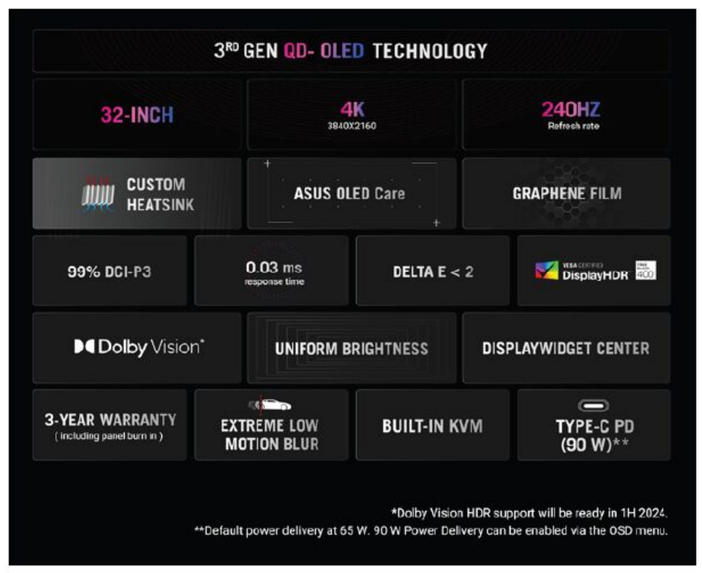
The PG32UCDM is not just about the panel, and Asus has included 2x HDMI v2.1 inputs, DisplayPort 1.4 (with Display Stream Compression), and USB-C that does both DisplayPort and up to 90W power output. The monitor also has a USB hub (3x USB 3.2 Gen 2 type A ports), a 3.5mm audio jack and SPDIF out. For added utility, the monitor has a built-in KVM and hotkey activated PIP mode.

ASUS OLED CARE

The Asus boffins have put a lot of work into the internals and software of the PG32UCDM, to make sure the QD-OLED panel has a long and fruitful life well beyond the 3 years of burn-in warranty. OLEDs suffer at higher temperatures, so the monitor includes advancements such as a high thermal conductivity graphene film, custom heatsinks and extra vents to keep every pixel cool no matter how long your gaming session lasts.

The Asus DisplayWidget software includes a range of OLED care measures to help get the best out of the panel. For example, it includes





an OLED optimised dimming screen saver mode, as well as pixel shifting, which adjusts the displayed image very slightly to make sure all pixels are used evenly. The software also detects any static images, such as on-screen logos, and dims them slightly to reduce any image retention effects. And finally, the screen has pixel cleaning mode with reminder, that when activated, automatically checks and recalibrates the screen.

ADVANCED SOFTWARE FEATURESET

Some of the best features of the PG32UCDM are enabled by the software. Asus DisplayWidget Software and monitor OSD do a lot more than just protect the OLED panel. In fact, you don't even need to access the OSD, as you can use the software to directly adjust the monitor settings on screen using your mouse.

Leveraging the OLEDs abilities, the monitor can dynamically adjust overall brightness to reduce eye strain in marathon gaming (or work) sessions. You can even give a targeted window its own level of brightness. For the esport gamers, the PG32UCDM can emulate esports monitor sizes, letting you practise directly on the equivalent to a 24.5in screen, or 27in screen. You also get a range of other in-game enhancements, such as Dynamic Shadow Boost, which analyses the image in real time and makes dark shadowy areas brighter so enemies are more easily spotted.

The monitor can also dynamically adjust your crosshair colour as it moves. There are also seven GameVisual modes, which automatically optimise your visual settings for specific game styles. Plus a suite of GamePlus enhancements, which were developed with pro gamers, such as on screen timers (great for RTS), FPS counter, sniper zoom mode, and a display alignment overlay to help line up multiple screens. No matter your gaming style, or even if you spend most of your time using a monitor for other tasks, the Asus ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM is an incredible gaming screen that will make you love your gaming even more.

Find out more at ***rog.asus.com/au***

No matter your gaming style, or even if you spend most of your time using a monitor for other tasks, **the Asus ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM is an incredible gaming screen that will make you love your gaming even more.**

*Dolby Vision HDR format support will be ready in 1H 2024.

Dungeonborne

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Mithril Interactive	Mithril Interactive	dungeonborne.com

DUNGEONBORNE

Explore the dungeons of Steam Next Fest's biggest hit

D*ungeonborne* came out of nowhere to be the surprise hit of Steam Next Fest. A medieval fantasy extraction dungeon crawler that is effectively *Escape From Tarkov* but with swords and skeletons, it is difficult not to love. It also isn't difficult to figure out where its inspiration came from.

You'd easily be forgiven for thinking you've seen *Dungeonborne* in action before. Despite only breaking cover as Steam Next Fest kicked off, it will feel instantly familiar to anyone who is aware of *Dark and Darker*, the similar game that blew up last year only to be bogged down by legal battles. From the setting to visual style and of course, the main gameplay loop, almost everything in *Dungeonborne* feels like it has been taken straight out of *Dark and Darker* and dropped into a version that is on Steam with not all that much else to differentiate itself.

But, when the core idea of running into a spooky place, whacking some enemies with a big sword or lighting them up with magic, stealing their loot and running away, is so instantly enjoyable there isn't much that needs to be expanded on. This was proven by the fact that *Dungeonborne* topped the Steam Next Fest charts for the entire duration of the event, despite the barebones demo that was available with just a couple of maps and not all that much to do in terms of an overarching meta-game other than build your bank balance.

IT ISN'T UNCOMMON TO FIND EXACTLY THE SAME ITEM MULTIPLE TIMES

For the most part, games where you have to extract from the map in order to keep whatever you find and not lose whatever you took in are punishingly hard, and building that bank balance can take hours. But I found *Dungeonborne* to be the exact opposite – providing you keep your wits about you. With massive maps, a very generous timer on the battle royale-style closing circle of death, and not much in the way of storage space, it is very easy to get in, fill your pockets with decent loot and get out without ever seeing another player.

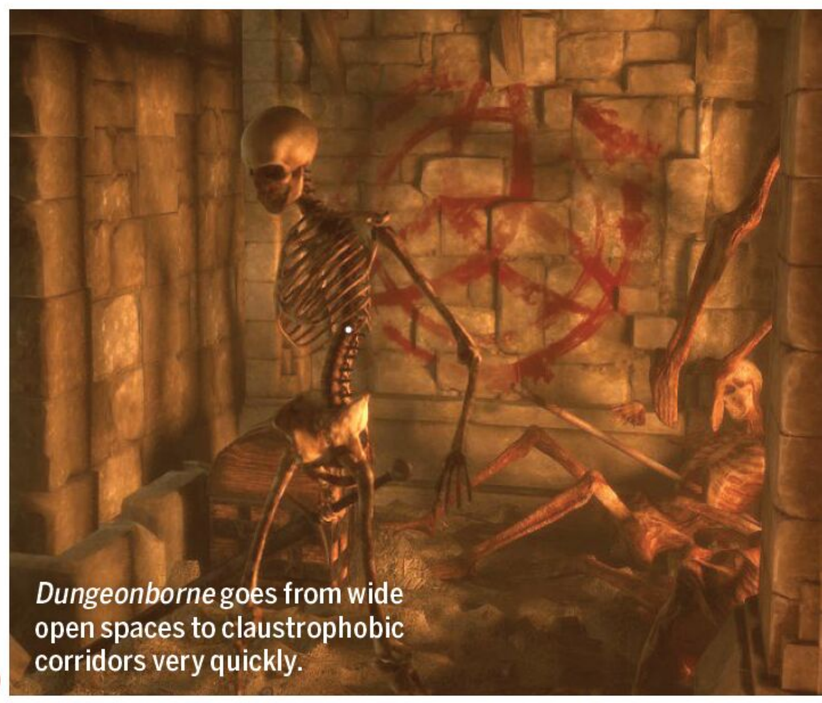
As someone who will happily stick to the outskirts of a *Tarkov* map so there is less chance of running into another player and losing my loot, it was a refreshing change at first. After just a couple of runs, it became obvious that a lot of players die early on to basic mobs, and with the big maps available in the beta – one of which was for solos and another for teams – you can dodge fights pretty easily. Within a couple of hours, I'd survived almost all of the time, and built up a very healthy bank balance by grabbing all the valuable trinkets I could find and selling them to the merchant once I was out.

FIRST LOOK

GIVE ME RANDOMNESS

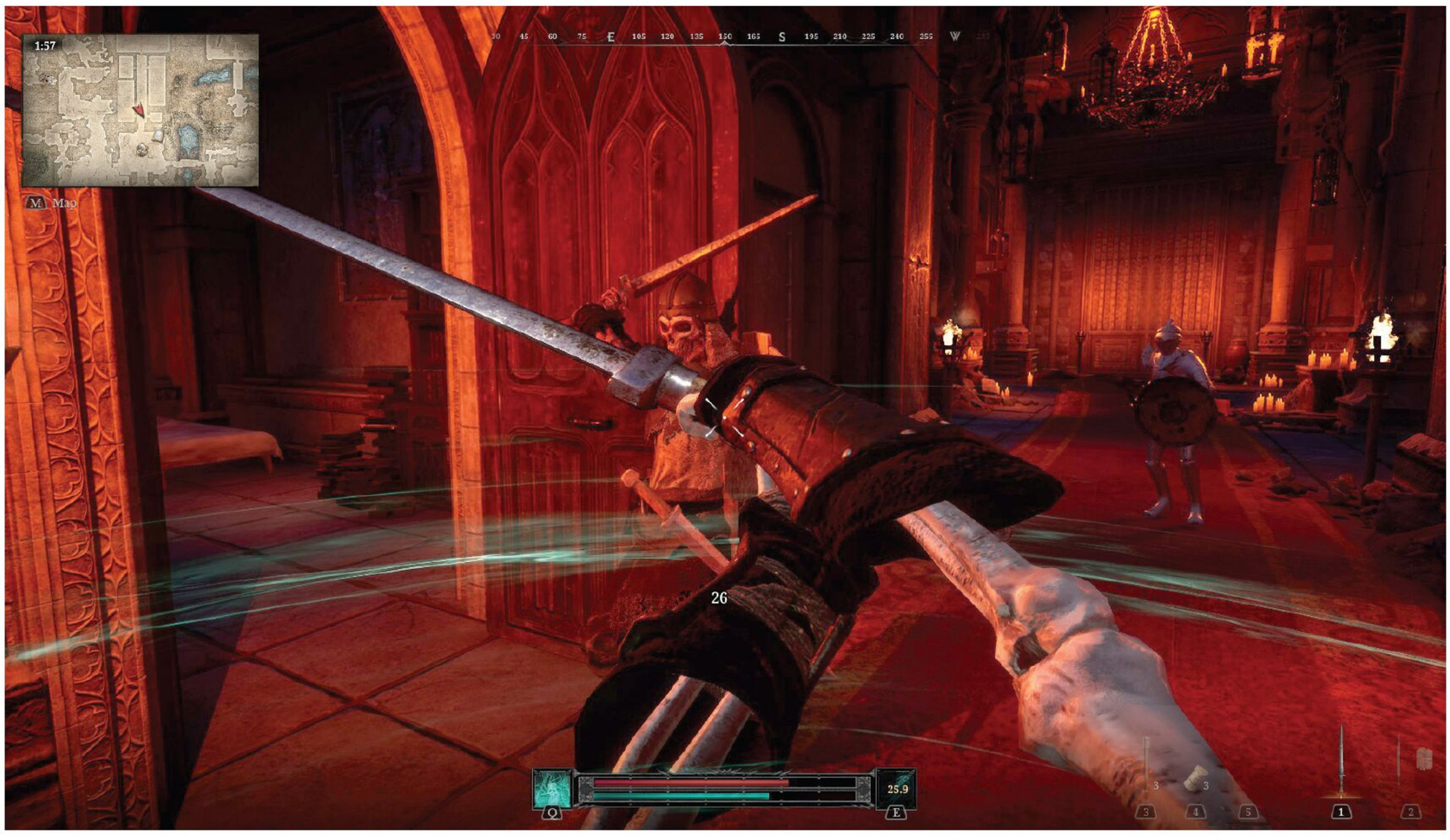
But this quickly grew tiresome. Once you start to learn the maps, or even one section of a map given it always seemed to spawn me in one of about four locations despite there being 16 players spawning in at different places, you realise everything is exactly the same during every run. The same enemies spawn in the same locations, and with very basic patrol patterns you can easily learn how to aggro just one of a group to make fights easier or just run past them to get to the next set of loot.

Loose loot around the world and not in chests always spawns in the same locations, and there is so much of it that even if there is some RNG involved it's difficult to tell because of the lack of variation between items. Loot in chests and found on dead AI monsters fares a little better in terms of offering exciting items, but it isn't uncommon to find exactly the same item multiple times. If decisions about what to drop or keep were more regular there would be a lot more thought that goes into your looting, but



Dungeonborne goes from wide open spaces to claustrophobic corridors very quickly.

Dungeonborne



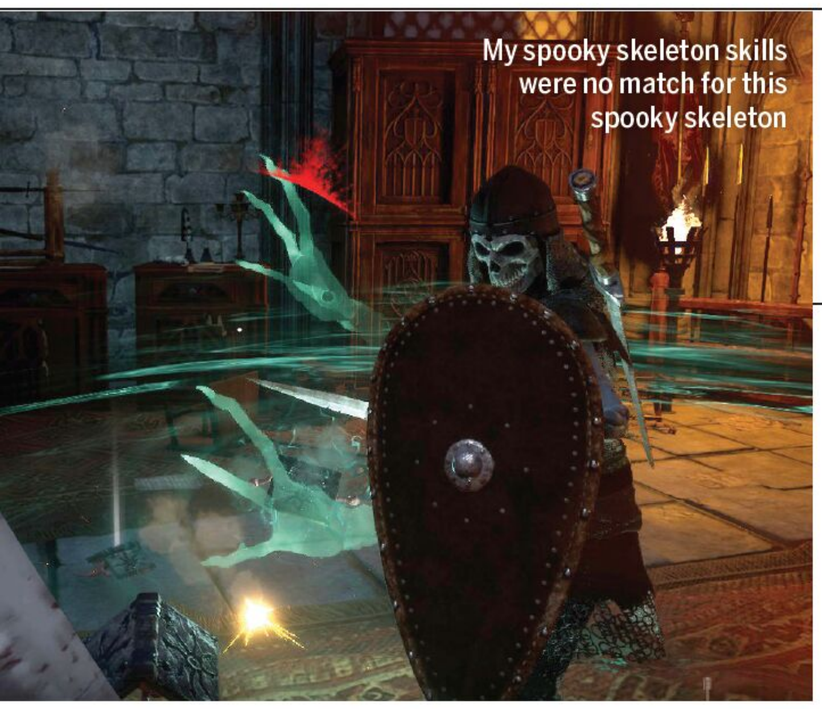
ABOVE: The pyromancer was great fun, even this statue applauded my fire.

LEFT: Two death knights in a room. They might kiss.

Dungeonborne

RIGHT: Fireballs do a lot of damage to trees. Who knew?

BELOW: This was moments before that big sword bonked me on the head, ending my run.



once you get upgrades to the base items the game gives you for free after you die, there is often little reason to change anything out as you will just find the same gear over and over again.

If there is one thing *Dungeonborne* needs above everything else, it's randomness. With randomised monster spawns you'll always be on your toes as to what could be around the next corner. Randomised loot spawns take away the ability to create the best path through a map to quickly get your loot and get out, and randomised gear stats would give you proper decisions to make on what gear you use.

FIGHTING IS FUN

Despite a lack of ranged combat given the medieval setting, and a need to balance magic with limited range to not make swords totally useless, fights against other players, while rare unless you go looking for them, actually feel quite varied. With each character having two abilities to use, which are class-specific, a lot of fights come down to how you use these skills rather than swinging your sword.

My first character, a fighter, was designed to be a tank making the most of heavy armour at the expense of speed. One skill tried to make up for this by offering a short burst of speed as you ran, while the other made me spin around holding my weapon out and slicing into anything stupid enough to get in the way. It was a seemingly simple combo but, in reality, it often left me exposed to characters that could attack from outside the range of my spin, and bashing them with my big sword was normally more effective.

My second character was much more fun. As a pyromancer, I had a big fireball I could charge up and blast enemies with, and an AoE fiery knockback to make sure enemies stayed out of sword-bashing range. In the smaller rooms that often feature items that are difficult to get past ,like massive tables or storage crates, I could often create a Scooby Doo-style chase where I ran around the table blasting fireballs in their face while they would follow me around rarely getting in range to attack. Being on the other end must have been annoying, but to me, it was great fun.

AS A PYROMANCER, I HAD A BIG FIREBALL I COULD CHARGE UP AND BLAST ENEMIES WITH

The last boy in my *Dungeonborne* stable was a death knight, who was basically a skeleton version of the fighter but way better. His version of the spin attack summoned dead souls in a ring around him to do damage, while his other ability sent out a deathly hand to grab a foe, or ally if you wanted, and bring them closer. It felt a little overpowered in the demo, as the soul ring dealt a lot of damage, but of the three this felt the most satisfying and like an actual combo you could use.

The *Dungeonborne* demo has its moments, especially in fights against other players, but it is clear it needs a lot more work before it can become great. There needs to be more of a reason, other than just making money, to go into battle and loot and that loot needs to feel more like a prize. Fights with players could do with being a bit more common, and there are some much-needed balance changes or ability reworks that should be glaringly obvious.

But all of this is seemingly easy to fix with time, and with no word on when *Dungeonborne* might return you'd hope its next iteration fairs slightly better. With just more content and a bit of fine-tuning *Dungeonborne* could be great, and there is a lot of potential here if things go well.

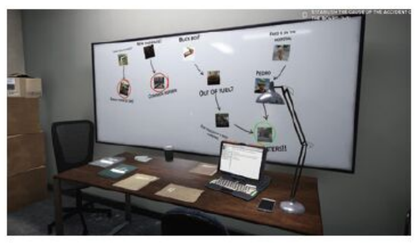
A BIG ELEPHANT

However, there is a massive elephant in the room that simply can't be ignored. *Dungeonborne* is effectively a *Dark and Darker* clone and its main advantage over it is that *Dungeonborne* is on Steam and *Dark and Darker* isn't. A recent ruling in the legal battle between Nexon and *Dark and Darker* developers Ironmace could start the wheels in motion for a return to Steam, and if that happens there would need to be some big changes made to *Dungeonborne* to make it stand out. Otherwise, you may as well just go play *Dark and Darker*, which feels like a more fleshed-out version of the same concept.

We could very easily go from having no games like this on Steam to having two by the time the next *Dungeonborne* test comes around, and it will be interesting to see if it can hit the same impressive player numbers again if that is the case. But if it remains the only option on Steam, then it will surely continue to prove popular, even if there is arguably a better version available elsewhere.

Mike Stubbs

Plane Accident



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Out now (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
White Pig Games

PUBLISHER
Duality Games

LINK
whitepiggames.com

PLANE ACCIDENT

Liven up a walk in the woods by investigating a crash

First-person games tend to hand you a shotgun then send you off in search of someone to unload it into, so it's a refreshing change to play a game in which the most dangerous thing you'll be waving around is a cordless drill (and you'll need some batteries for that too).

Plane Accident is not a game about causing a jumbo jet to plummet from around 30,000ft, but instead casts you as an investigator, first on the scene following a crash and responsible for working out what happened using drones, email, and little flags that mark the location of debris.

The tutorial mission is entirely set in a warehouse, with all the parts and items you'll need in easy reach, but once you've sniffed out the reason this plane crashed (it looks like a bomb, which makes it sound much more action-packed than your trips to and from the office, courier truck and tool bench would otherwise be) you're sent out to the woods to tackle the real thing.

PLAYED IT

SPARSE WOODLAND

When you get there in your pickup truck, there's little to see beyond the sort of house in the woods some of us dream of and a stream with a little waterfall. It's a sparse woodland, the rocks kind of angular (in the warehouse tutorial, there were shafts of sunlight passing through the blinds that promised some lovely outdoor locations) and some textures decidedly low-res once you get too close to them. It's a Unity game and this is demo code, so there's time to sharpen it up.

Once the plane wreck is in sight, you can use a drone to scout the area out (it rises straight up from the back of your truck, taking no notice of the power lines above) and scan the area for debris. I find the propeller of the plane a long way from the fuselage, but also discover that someone has dumped a washing machine and an old Atari game console out there too. The plane's two seats have been thrown from the doors during the crash, though the bodies have been removed, and the engine is still on fire. I quickly put it out with a fire extinguisher, and get back to marking debris and taking photos before calling a contractor to clear away the wreck. The cleanup company, in a wry movie reference, is called Mr Wolf.

OFFICE JOB

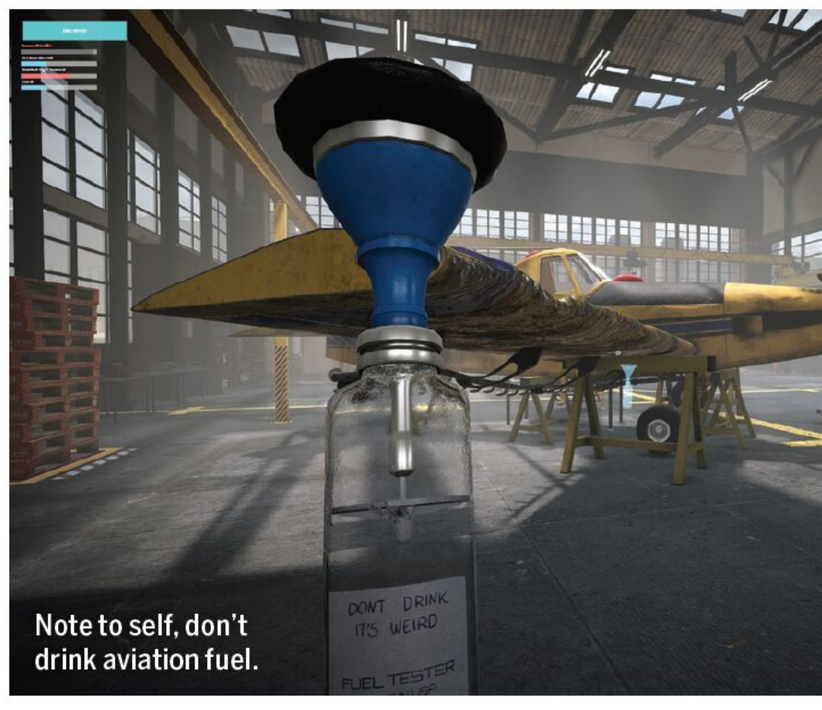
The real investigation starts when you're back at your hangar-like office, where you're required to answer questions such as whether the fuel gauge in the plane was working, could a farmer's penchant for rigging his crop sprayer aircraft with extra-large tanks have contributed to an emergency landing in a corn field, and why you can't walk into the office while holding a drill.

The strange forcefield that stops you from doing this is symptomatic of the game's desire that you do everything in what it considers the right order, and for those of us raised on *Hitman* and *Skyrim* it can be jarring to have your actions prescribed like this. You've always got a checklist in the top corner of the screen, and there's little room for improvisation.

Still, the investigations don't take long, and the scenarios we've seen, including a crop sprayer whose assistant got gallons and litres mixed up, have the potential to go in imaginative directions, though tend to be vague while you build up evidence, before giving you a key piece of information right at the end. Still, it's nice to get out in the woods and explore once in a while, and *Plane Accident* is the kind of interesting diversion that allows you to put your shotgun down for a bit.

Ian Evenden

THE REAL INVESTIGATION STARTS WHEN YOU'RE BACK AT YOUR HANGAR-LIKE OFFICE



Note to self, don't drink aviation fuel.

Plane Accident

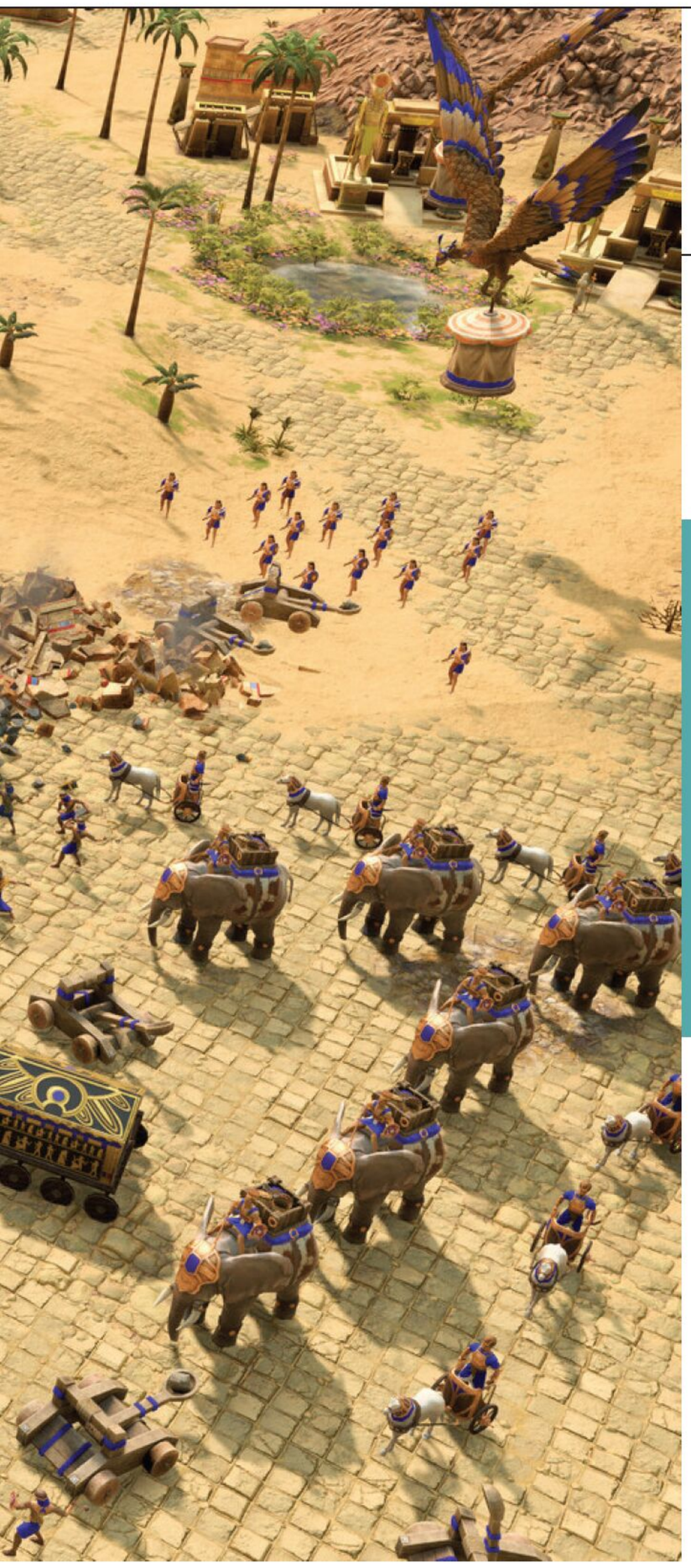
ABOVE: A lucky survivor of a plane crash.

LEFT: Your truck has excellent exhausts.

Age of Mythology: Retold

ABOVE: Unit counts have been ramped way up for *Retold*, so expect bigger battles.

RIGHT: Along with the classic mythical monster units, there are now rechargeable god powers, too.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2024

DEVELOPER
Forgotten Empires

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

LINK
tinyurl.com/ynz2zv36

AGE OF MYTHOLOGY: RETOLD

Revamped graphics, changes to unit numbers and more

The upcoming *Age of Mythology: Retold* has just shown off its signature mythological monsters in detail, including the terrible Medusas, the flying Pegasus scout, and the titan Cerberus, and I've got to say the monsters are dang good looking.

These visually punchy new models are part of the overall effort to make *Age of Mythology: Retold* a real upgrade from the original 2002 game, including changes to the models as you upgrade through the ages – though they come complete with a stack of classic sounds and twists on the old animations. The Medusa death sound is just as I remember it.

That's just what *Age of Mythology: Retold* producer Earnest Yuen had to say when I spoke with him about the remake, which will release this year on PC and Xbox. Yuen has worked at Microsoft for nearly a quarter-century, starting as QA on the first *Age of Empires* – it's clear that his love for the series runs deep.

"*Age of Mythology: Retold* is way beyond what we normally do for definitive editions," says Yuen. He and the team want to make the game as epic, engaging, and pretty as players remember it, rather than simply updating what was there. "We want to build the game in your head."

That means using changes to the graphics and game engine that were made for the *Age of Empires III Definitive Edition*, then going beyond that. The start is "adding ray tracing, upping the population limit, [and] adding an engine to handle special effects," according to Yuen. Population limit in particular will be a big change for *Age of Mythology* not just in how visually impressive it is, but in the fundamentals of how it plays. Strategies in *AoM* were often boxed in by the strict limits on units set by the limitations of the day's graphical tech – even if it was widely praised at the time.

Another big tweak comes in how much control you have over your myth units. Back in 2002 they just used their powers whenever they were off cooldown – but no more. "In *Retold* what we are doing is we actually make that user-controllable, you can actually micro and use that when you want to," says Yuen.

ANOTHER BIG TWEAK COMES IN HOW MUCH CONTROL YOU HAVE OVER YOUR MYTH UNITS

GODLY POWER

The other huge change is in your god powers: rather than one-and-done bolts of lightning that will never reappear in a match, those powers are now on cooldowns. It's a huge change to how *Age of Mythology* plays, but has been well-received by the cadre of high-level, competitive *AoM* players recruited by Yuen and the studio to participate in playtesting.

FIRST LOOK

"The god power change is both great for esports and for watching the game," says Yuen, because you know that lightning bolt or meteor is coming back around soon. "That anticipation makes it much more fun to watch."

The hope there is that by making the game a bit more accessible, and helping it conform a bit better to modern expectations of what an RTS is, they can encourage some of the fun stories they've heard from players of the past *Definitive Editions*, whether that's participating in a revitalised competitive play scene, watching tournaments, discovering a classic, or enjoying a game they loved as a kid with their own kids.

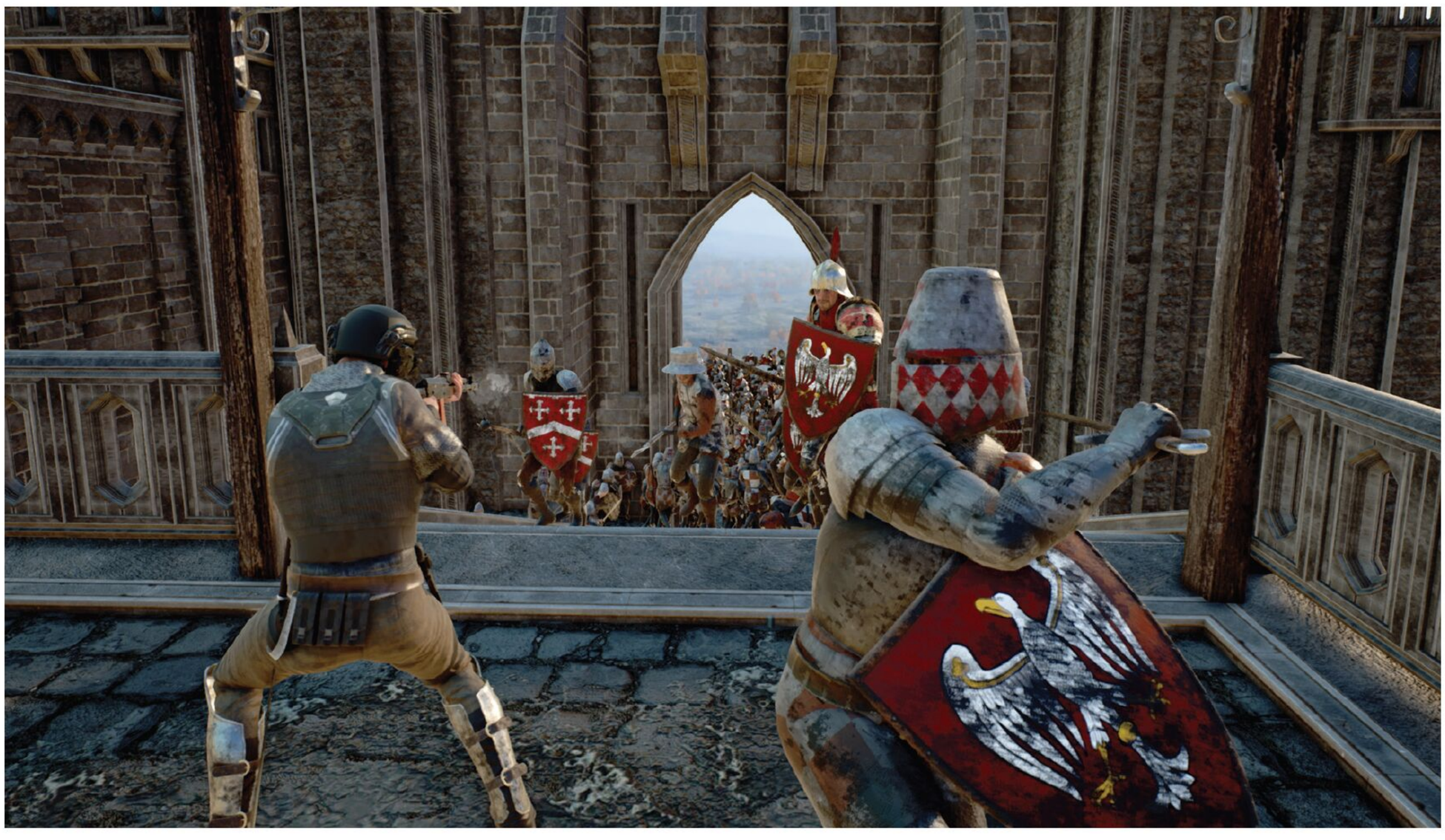
The updated interface is a given for a remaster like this, but game balance changes are vital as well. The Microsoft team still wants it to be a remake that emphasises how great the original was, not discard what made it great in the first place.

Jonathan Bolding

Kingmakers

ABOVE: 'Tis but a flesh wound!

RIGHT: It's a lovely day in the village, and you are a horrible time traveller.



The cavalry has arrived.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2024

DEVELOPER
Redemption Road Games

PUBLISHER
tinyBuild

LINK
tinybuild.com

KINGMAKERS

Just another medieval combat game, with attack helicopters

The first 22 seconds of a game trailer can tell you a lot. They set the scene, perhaps flash some publisher or engine logos, and establish the setting of the game in an easily digestible way. In *Kingmakers*' trailer, we see armoured warriors clash on the field of battle.

Aha, you think. I know what this game is all about. With *Manor Lords* also donning its armour and hefting its sword in this issue, it might be forgivable to think that PCPP has been taken over by fans of medieval warfare. And while that might actually be true, following the siege of PCPP Towers in 2020 that saw nasty trebuchet injuries all round, it's the 23rd second of the trailer that shows *Kingmakers* isn't ploughing the same ridge and furrow as its fellow feudal system admirers.

On the 23rd second, a truck drives into the struggling melee. It takes a run-up first, accelerating between dark-future ruined skyscrapers before some Back to the Future-style time travel flashes, then emerges for a spot of 15th-century roadkill as men at arms fly over its bonnet and are crushed beneath its wheels. Our intrepid protagonist, who seemingly has no sense of fair play, goes on to headshot someone with a pistol before blowing swordsmen into a fine red mist with a shotgun, and later stands on a castle wall with a grenade launcher and rifle, sniping a commander off his horse before dropping explosive little gifts into the swarming throng.

ON THE 23RD SECOND, A TRUCK DRIVES INTO THE STRUGGLING MELEE

It's quite a thing to behold, like a zombie horde game in which the undead are heavily armed and well trained, but the chaos is tempered by sections in which you're able to switch to a *Total War*-style top-down view to position and command the squads under your control. There's also a *Fortnite* flavour, with you placing buildings to build what could be a base that needs defending.

APOCALYPSE

What's going on here is, apparently, simple. You've been sent back from the future to help avert the apocalypse by altering the course of history. Or at least by blowing it up a bit. At one point in the trailer, an Apache helicopter chops across the battlefield, the bodies of soldiers both mounted and on foot flying apart in its wake. There will be airstrikes too, though it's not clear if you'll be the one at the controls. The huge crowds of soldiers to take on – we're promised thousands of them fighting at the same time – make it appear akin to games such as *Dynasty Warriors* or *Earth Defense Force* as you carve your way through.

FIRST LOOK

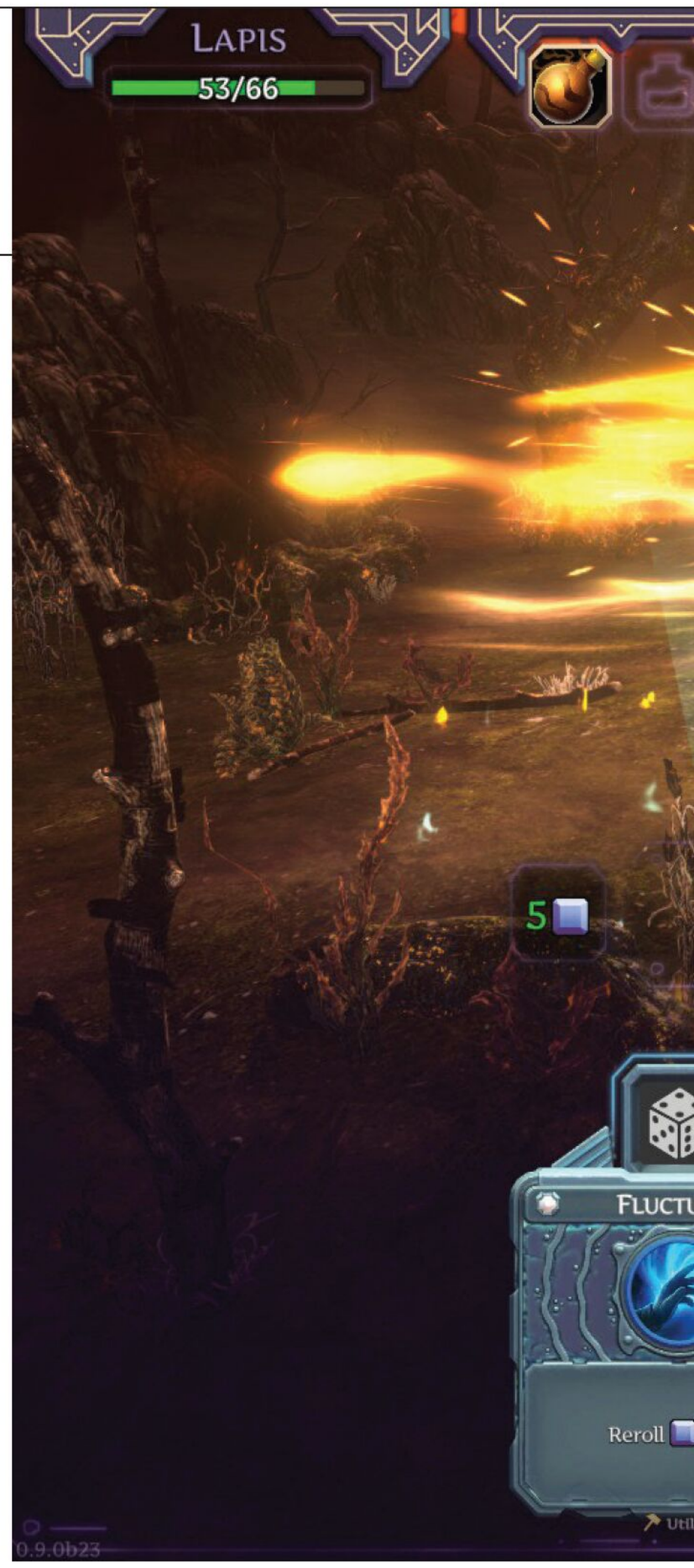
What it mainly is, however, is a glorious romp in which you gun down hundreds of medieval soldiers with weapons beyond their imagination. A snatch of a far-future setting in the trailer raises the possibility of guns even more advanced than the ballistic shooters used for most of the killing, but it's also possible to go old-school, fighting melee duels against knights in armour.

There's also co-op, and the thought of four friends bringing guns to a sword fight, tearing through whole regiments of infantry and cavalry with assault rifles and grenades while screaming at one another down the voice comms is enough to either sell you on the game completely or make you run for safety.

Kingmakers will enter Early Access on Steam later this year, and comes from Redemption Road Games, which made 2019 biker gang actioner *Road Redemption*. All we have so far is the trailer, but the strength of the basic idea shines through the chaos it displays, and with time ticking down before we get to play it, this is one that should grace quite a few players' wishlists.

Ian Evenden

SpellRogue



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
February 2024 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
Guidelight Games

PUBLISHER
Ghost Ship Publishing

LINK
spellrogue.com

SPELLROGUE

Remove the randomness of dice with smart thinking and maths

S*pellRogue* is a roguelike that makes you feel like a genius. As you pick up spells you'll start to create combinations that just feel too powerful and would surely have been nerfed if the developer had noticed. Then, after a while, you'll realise this is exactly what they wanted you to do.

Best described as *Slay the Spire* but with dice, *SpellRogue* is less about building a big deck of spells and more about making the most of your limited options. You'll start out a run with three base spells and can add up to four more. You'll have access to all seven spells every turn, but you will need to roll some dice and get some luck to use them. Some require specific numbers whereas others just require a numerical total, so you could put a six, a three and a one into a spell that requires a value of ten to cast it.

There's a good amount of variety in what the spells can do, but for the most part, they all boil down to three main areas. Spells that do damage, spells that give you a shield for incoming damage and spells that either give you a positive status effect or your enemy a negative one. While you can build an all-out damage set of spells that all require high dice rolls, you'll quickly realise that luck plays too much of a factor in fights, and to succeed you need to minimise the randomness as much as possible.

THERE'S A GOOD AMOUNT OF VARIETY IN WHAT THE SPELLS CAN DO

PLAYED IT

I'M A GENIUS

The first time I beat *SpellRogue* my system was all about rolling ones. Thanks to an upgrade to a spell I got early, whenever I dropped in a one it would do four damage to any enemy, and give me +1 barrier. A barrier is a permanent shield that regenerates every time you hit End Turn and I could cast this spell three times a turn giving me a massive automatic block after just a few rounds of combat as well as dealing damage.

But rolling three ones, when by default you only roll three dice per turn, is almost impossible. So that's where I purposely selected spells that could influence the dice. By the end of my run, I had multiple spells that could change the value of a die, and other bonuses that gave me even more dice to roll per turn. So not being able to brute force my way to having at least three ones each turn was a rarity.

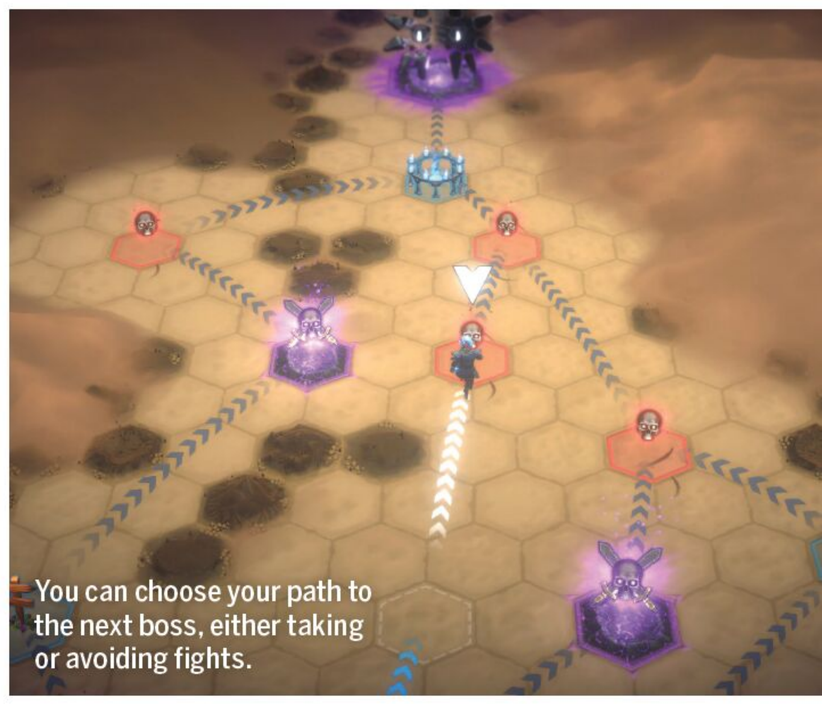
Add in a couple of high-damage spells I could throw the high-value dice in and quickly I was able to take down the most powerful enemies I met on my run while taking little damage thanks to the barrier. It felt like I had broken the game and found an exploit that would surely be patched.

Then, as I started my next run with another of the three characters I realised their base spells could be used in another combo. Whereas I was increasing the value of a roll to go above six and get extra dice with a value of one, these spells could automatically cast low-level dice, and some of the damage spells hit harder based on how many different dice you drop in. So putting in six ones would do significantly more damage than a single six.

CLICKING

This is when it clicked that building combos that remove the luck of the dice is exactly how you are supposed to play, and while I felt like a genius initially discovering it, I quickly learnt that without leaning into these synergies your runs will end early. Now I'm on a quest to find the strongest combos possible, and judging by some of the achievements, there's still a lot left to discover.

Mike Stubbs



You can choose your path to the next boss, either taking or avoiding fights.

SpellRogue

ABOVE: Some fights can be explosive.

LEFT: With tons of status effects there are probably countless combos to discover.

Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail

A NEW DAWN

A whole new world of adventure awaits PC gamers in bold new expansion FINAL FANTASY XIV: DAWNTRAIL

By Mollie Taylor

Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail

BELOW: We'll be seeing a lot more of the Mamool Ja as we head to their home region of Yok Tural.

It's been a wonderful decade of adventuring for our Warriors of Light, but *Final Fantasy XIV* isn't done with us just yet. While *Endwalker* wrapped up the Hydaelyn-Zodiark storyline, Square Enix has flung the door wide open on a whole new adventure in upcoming expansion *Dawntrail*.

It's an exciting new arc that's awaiting us, one which director and producer Naoki Yoshida described as "the very best summer vacation" during last year's Las Vegas Fan Festival. I'm sure it'll be a much-needed pivot from the world-ending doom and gloom the Warrior of Light has dealt with for the last few years, and I'm dying to know more about just what *Dawntrail* will bring. Thankfully, I was able to have a chat with Yoshi-P – the nickname Yoshida is more widely known by – to see what's in store for us in the new expansion and what the future of *Final Fantasy XIV* has to offer.

It's quite fitting that Tural, the setting of *Dawntrail*, is also known as the New World. As we set sail for a new continent, I wondered if everything we've come to know of Eorzea would be left behind. Though *Endwalker* saw many loose ends tied up, there's still a lot we don't know about the Allagan Empire and Ascians despite their constant presence since the beginning. Thankfully, Yoshi-P assured me that Eorzea and all its worldbuilding won't be forgotten. "The world setting is not something that stagnates, but is created and expanded with your adventures," he tells me. "So, as the world of the adventure expands, there is also a 'past history' that is created anew. In other words, we continue to update our world to ensure the adventure for our players is one of excitement. Therefore, I do not think that we will close the book on the Allagan Empire of the Ascians. You see, the world is made up of continuities, for they are all connected."

It's reassuring to know that we're still going to see old foes and lore nuggets cropping up as *Final Fantasy XIV* expands on its other continents. I've been playing the MMO for almost ten years now, and Eorzea holds a special place in my heart. Though we can whizz around and teleport at will, I'm still grateful to know that canonically we'll be able to continue learning more about the regions we've spent years exploring.

Of course, that doesn't diminish the excitement in exploring new zones. My favourite part of each expansion is seeing what new areas there are to explore, and *Dawntrail* feels extra special because we're venturing off the continent. We've seen a few of these already thanks to the Tokyo Fan Fest: There's the town of Tuliyollal which is sporting some serious Mesoamerican vibes that continue out into zones like Urqopacha and Yak T'el.

Then there's something so distinctly different, I haven't stopped thinking about it since its reveal: Solution Nine. It takes the plush forests and stone buildings from above and hits the flip button, giving us an ultra-futuristic city with huge skyscrapers and neon lights. It's been giving me some huge Academia from *Final Fantasy XIII-2* vibes, and I've been seeing plenty of *Final Fantasy IX* comparisons being tossed around too.

I attempt to squeeze some more information out of Yoshi-P around its place in the story and any additional details, but he's being mighty coy about the whole thing. "This area is at the core of a great mystery in *Dawntrail*, and any attempt to discuss its positioning or design inspiration would inevitably lead to spoilers," he said. "So, let me keep it a secret for now."

Does that just make me even more freakin' curious about the whole thing? Of course it does. Solution Nine feels nothing like anything we've seen in this vacation-centric bonanza, which makes it the perfect place for secrets galore. We've still no

AN ULTRA-FUTURISTIC CITY WITH HUGE SKYSCRAPERS AND NEON LIGHTS

XIV

idea just what the mystery is yet, which is making me even more excited to dive into *Dawntrail*.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

We already know there's going to be more to explore outside of the expansion's zones and dungeons too, as Yoshi-P revealed that field exploration zones à la *Stormblood*'s Eureka and *Shadowbringers*' Bozja would be making a return. Despite the two zones garnering some fairly heavy criticism at the time, it's safe to say that they were a sorely missed feature in *Endwalker*.

I ask Yoshi-P about the scope of *Dawntrail*'s planned field exploration,

FINAL, FINAL, FANTASY, FANTASY

Here are some of my favourite references

RETURN TO IVALICE: STORMBLOOD

These *Final Fantasy XII*-themed alliance raids are fun. Sure, one of the bosses tortures you with maths, but the fights and visuals are still unrivalled.

SIGMASCAPE 4.0: STORMBLOOD

Final Fantasy VI's Kefka remains the coolest series villain, so it's no surprise he makes an appearance. He even gets a rearranged version of his theme, Dancing Mad.

BARBARICCIA: ENDWALKER

One of the many *FFIV* references in *Endwalker*, Barbarricia has a fantastic modern design and a fun hair-filled and windy fight to go along with it.

THE MANDERVILLE GOLD SAUCER: A REALM REBORN

You can't do *Final Fantasy* references without *FFVII*, and what better way to honour the game than with its giant casino complete with minigames?

XIV

NEW HORIZONS

Taking a peek at what's to come in Dawntrail

NEW DUNGEONS

Mystery Dungeon #1
These don't have names yet, and I won't attempt to invent one. It's very lush and tropical though, with caves and rivers ripe for exploration.

Mystery Dungeon #2
Much colder compared to #1, with giant purple crystals and a strange aura. It looks like there's a fortress higher up, too. Mysterious.

NEW AREAS

Tuliyollal
Yok Tural's seaside town with some gorgeous South American-inspired architecture.

Solution Nine
A futuristic town lined with neon lights and towering glass skyscrapers, located in Xak Tural.

Yak T'El
A plush zone, home of the Xbr'aal group of Hrothgar and the Mamool Ja.

Shaaloani
An arid zone, giving big old-school desert vibes complete with mine railways.

NEW JOBS

Pictomancer
What if Banksy was a catboy? Pictomancer trades a sword for a giant paintbrush that can be used to draw pictures of elements and beasts to bring down enemies. All I can draw is a stickman, will that do any damage?

Viper
What's better than one sword? Two. Quick strikes can be mixed up by connecting both blades into one mega-weapon for big damage.

and while I didn't quite get the answer I was looking for, I was offered a great insight into the overall plans to create pockets of exploration content of all sizes. "We're attempting to perfect *FFXIV* on a slightly larger scale, as opposed to an expansion basis," he told me.

Part of that has been tweaking things throughout the years, making things bigger in *Stormblood* with "not only enhancing simple battle content but providing a type of play that allows players to explore large areas", before scaling it back towards the end of *Shadowbringers* and into *Endwalker* with "content geared toward small parties" and working on features like the Trust system to enable more of the story to be cleared solo.

Thanks to all that work, Yoshi-P tells me, "I believe that we are now prepared to cater for all kinds of needs, and in [*Dawntrail*], I'd like to aim for enhancement and a leap forward in content whereby players fight

I WAS OFFERED A GREAT INSIGHT INTO THE OVERALL PLANS

alongside a large group of comrades in *FFXIV* as an MMORPG, while also displaying diversification of the aforementioned gameplay aspects." Part of that means the return of Bozja/Eureka-esque field operations, which Yoshida admits to me "have been requested a lot in the community".

Variant dungeons are also a part of Yoshi-P's plans to "expand *FFXIV*'s content". A new addition in *Endwalker*, variant dungeons have drawn some praise but a lot of criticism alongside it. I wondered if variant dungeons would be scaled down or retired entirely down the line, but that doesn't seem to be the case, with Yoshida revealing, "Alongside the large-scale content, we have several proposals in the works for the variant dungeon series!"

PAINTING A PICTURE

It's not all pretty new places to walk around and explore, though. As is the standard with every expansion, we've got two new jobs to enjoy in the dual-sword swinging Viper and

NEW PLAYABLE RACE

Hrothgar

After nearly five years of only male hrothgar, we're finally getting the female variation of this *Final Fantasy X*-inspired race.

colourful magic caster Pictomancer. The latter is definitely where my personal interests lie, as someone who mainly plays support classes like Dancer and casting jobs like Summoner. Pictomancer has traditionally been a support class in the *Final Fantasy* series, but magical DPS classes in *Final Fantasy XIV* are traditionally more damage-heavy compared to the slightly more support-centric physical ranged role.

When I ask Yoshi-P about this, he is sure to clarify that he doesn't want to necessarily box these roles into the confines I outlined. "We do not have a rule in our team that all support roles are to be left to physical ranged DPS jobs," he says. "So we cannot tell what will happen about this point moving forward."

Yoshi-P did tell me that Pictomancer won't have a ton of support abilities, but "when compared with Black Mage, there are some synergy-related actions for the party members but this isn't the main aspect of the job". Sounds like it'll be something a little closer to a Red Mage or Summoner, something that I'm totally down for.

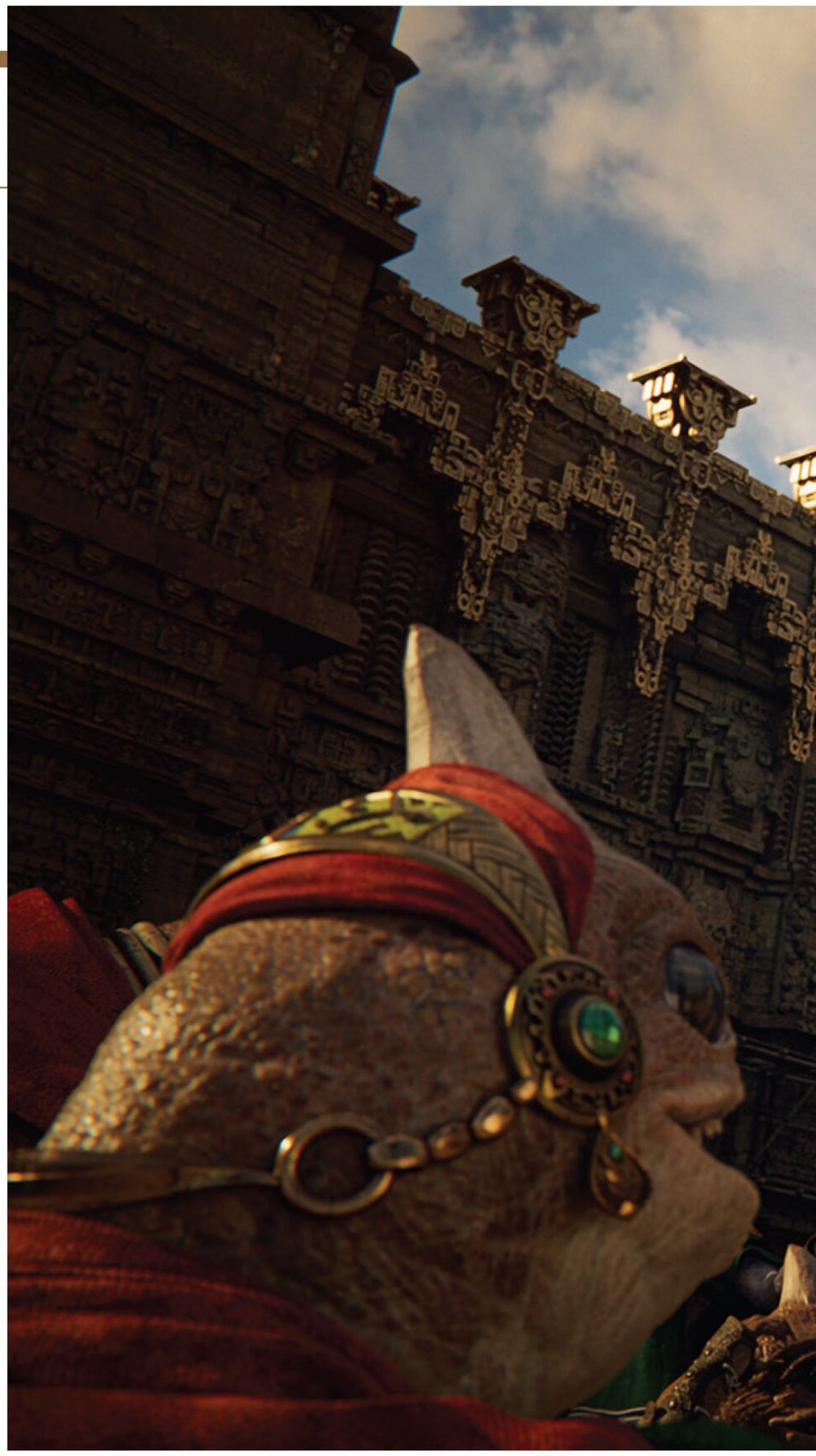
I do always appreciate how *Final Fantasy XIV* plucks various aspects of the series and works them into the MMO, and it's something you can see all the way back in *A Realm Reborn* with the *Final Fantasy III*-inspired Crystal Tower raids. That's continuing in *Dawntrail*, with the new alliance raids being themed after MMO predecessor *Final Fantasy XI* and allied tribe Pelupelu coming from *Final Fantasy X*. I ask Yoshi-P if there are any games in the series he is champing at the bit to work in: "We have many plans and ideas, and will continue to incorporate the essence of various titles from the series to serve as a theme park for the FF series," he says. "Simply put, my personal wish is to approach *FFVII* in earnest, but with the *FFVII Remake* series in development, I don't want to get in their way. I would be very happy if we could do something after the *Remake* series is completed, and I'd like to ask players to support the *FFVII Remake* series as well so that this can happen as soon as possible!"

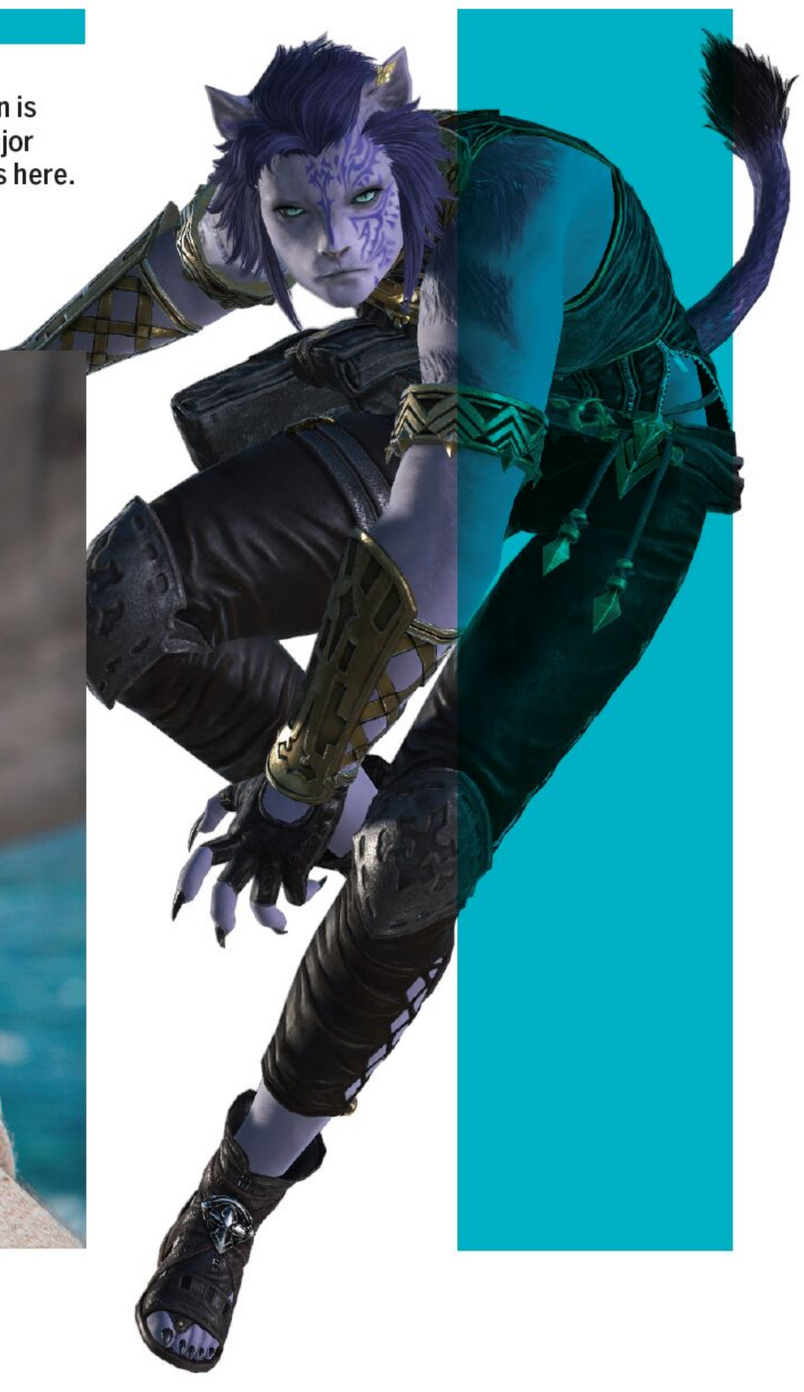
Outside of cribbing from the *Final Fantasy* series, there's been a whole host of collaborations over the years. From *Fall Guys* to Japanese superhero franchise Garo, there have been a lot of bizarre crossovers taking place. Some have come back, while others like the much-requested Yo-kai Watch collaboration are still awaiting their return. It perhaps won't be too long a wait though, according to Yoshi-P.

When I mention how hungry the community has been to see the Yo-kai event in particular return, he tells me: "We have received similar feedback from around the world, and with a few power-ups, it looks like those Yo-kai might just be making their return!"

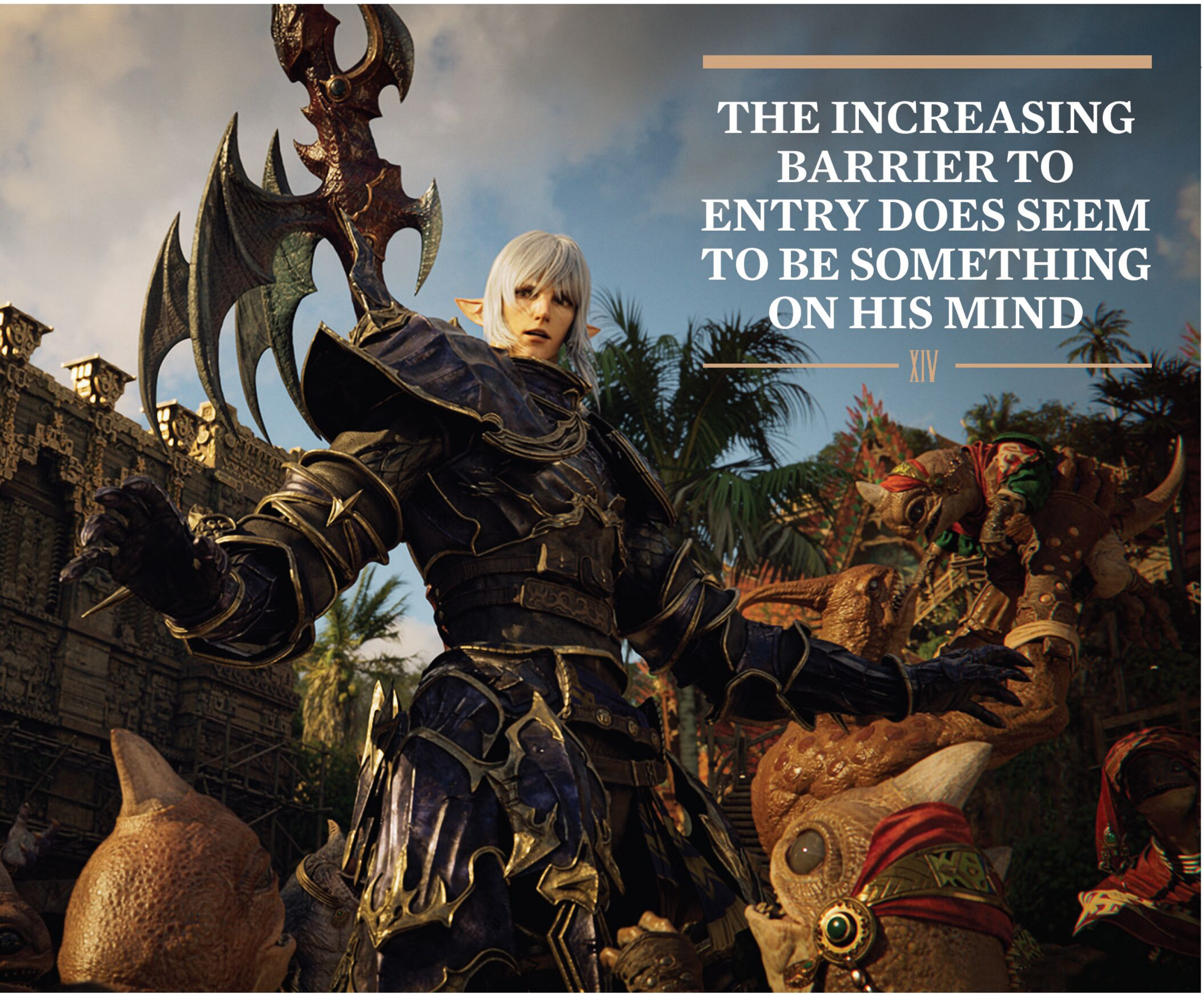
THE ROAD AHEAD

There's so much to look forward to, but for newbies, getting to *Dawntrail* is gonna take a long time now. There's an entire base game and four





ABOVE: Estinien is giving some major babysitter vibes here.



THE INCREASING BARRIER TO ENTRY DOES SEEM TO BE SOMETHING ON HIS MIND

XIV

A FRESH UPDATE

Some neat quality-of-life changes incoming

UNOBSTRUCTED EYEGLASSES

No more choosing between a hat or some nice specs. *Dawntrail* is giving equippable glasses their own slot so you can both see and look stylish.

MORE DYE SLOTS

Take a dye slot, double it, and bam, you got two. *Dawntrail* will have two dye channels for a ton of its gear, letting you experiment with more colour schemes and create unique palettes.

TIME TO STRATEGISE

Strategy Boards are coming to *Dawntrail*, offering a much nicer way to demonstrate mechanics and positionals. The UI is still in the works, but what we've seen looks like it's gonna be helpful.

PIXEL FACELIFT

Dawntrail will start to trickle in a larger graphical upgrade. Things like shadows and lighting will be given a nice revamp too, giving the decade-old MMO a shiny new coat of paint.

expansions to get through. *Final Fantasy XIV* is well into the triple digits for story completion at this point, and as the team continues to worldbuild, the more frightening it can be for newcomers to join in.

While paid story skips do exist, I had hoped there would be some sort of non-monetary option available to these folk. Yoshi-P had alluded to the possibility of it happening last summer, with the choice for players to dive in post-*Endwalker*. That won't be the case anytime soon, as Yoshi-P reckons it would lower the value of the overall narrative.

"We are not currently planning any kind of new skip feature," he told me. "This is something I'm constantly torn about, and we have already finished implementing a feature that allows players to learn about the story, setting and characters even when they skip the story. I'm concerned that if the globally acclaimed storyline can be skipped through a function, the value of the *FFXIV* game itself will be diminished."

The increasing barrier to entry does seem to be something on his mind though, "Please let me think about it some more. I do understand where you are coming from, so no need to worry about that."

You can still cough up a bit of money of course, and the news is disappointing for those who are intimidated by the time sink. But I do have to agree with Yoshida that half the fun comes from spending so long with such a colourful band of characters. With so many of them continuing the adventure with us into *Dawntrail*, it makes sense that Yoshi-P wants us all to get a little attached to them first.

We're still without a release date for *Dawntrail* – Yoshida has given the vague window of summer 2024, not wanting to repeat the two-week delay that *Endwalker* received rather at the last minute in 2021 – but there's still a lot to be excited about. So make sure to pack your best sunhat and your favourite class weapons, and get ready to set sail to the New World in a few months. ■

Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree

BRAVOUT

ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE is FromSoftware's most ambitious expansion yet

By Rick Lane

NGH

You might well ask why *Elden Ring* needs an expansion. FromSoftware's brilliant fantasy RPG is already colossal in its scope and depth – several orders of magnitude larger than any game that preceded it. Yet any longtime fan of FromSoft's work would have a quick and definitive answer – expansions are where the studio typically does its best work. From *Dark Souls'* *Artorias of the Abyss* to *Bloodborne's* *The Old Hunters*, FromSoft's expansions see its games at their most vivid, intense and strange. More than simple continuations of the base, FromSoft's expansions are often surrealist side adventures that fold back into the main narrative in surprising, yet essential ways.

Much like the base game, *Shadow of the Erdtree* aims to be exactly that, only more so. Following two years of silence, FromSoftware has finally broken cover on its hotly anticipated add-on, and everything unveiled suggests it'll be a classic example of the form. *Shadow of the Erdtree* will transport players to an entirely new yet strangely familiar land, shed light on one of the base game's most mysterious characters, and see players square off against the game's toughest foes yet. But it'll all be presented at *Elden Ring* scale,

IT WILL TRANSPORT PLAYERS TO AN ENTIRELY NEW YET FAMILIAR LAND

essentially adding a whole other *Dark Souls* into the already vast RPG.

Shadow of the Erdtree takes place in the Land of Shadow, which like FromSoftware's other notable DLCs, is an area separate from *Elden Ring*'s setting of the Lands Between. Yet according to director Hidetaka Miyazaki, the Land of Shadow wasn't always decoupled in this manner. In an interview with IGN, Miyazaki said the Land of Shadow "technically occupies the same space as the Lands Between, the same universe," but

TRAILER ANALYSIS

All the big moments from the Shadow of the Erdtree reveal

HATCHING A PLAN

1 The trailer opens with a shot of a withered arm dangling from a cracked, round egg. This is Miquella's cocoon. Found in Mohgwyn palace deep beneath Caelid, it's through this cocoon players will access the Land of Shadow.

ON THE TRAIL

2 This area with the graves was shown in the key art, with Miquella riding on horseback. The fact that the Tarnished rides through the same area demonstrates that players will quite literally be following Miquella's trail.

KEY MOMENT

BOUGH TO YOUR MASTER

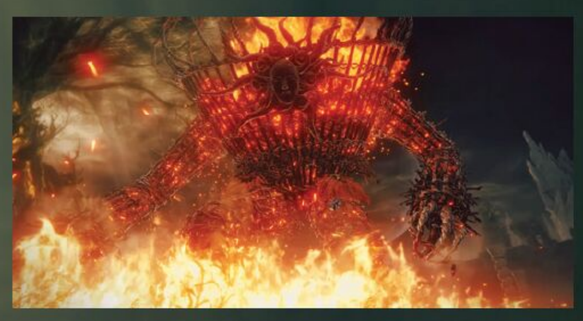
3 The tree looming over the Land of Shadow does not appear to be the Erdtree. Interestingly, Miquella's Haligtree has a similar split trunk, although one of the splits is broken when the player visits the Haligtree in *Elden Ring*. The veils above the tree, meanwhile, are similar to those suspended above Queen Marika's bed, perhaps hinting that the Land of Shadow is some dreamscape of Miquella's.

ASSEMBLING FARUM AZULA

4 This hulking fortress is similar to Crumbling Farum Azula, a late-game area in vanilla *Elden Ring*. Given how FromSoft expansions like to play with time and alternate realities, this could well be Farum Azula before it was consumed by a giant vortex.

LION ABOUT

5 This lion dancer appears to be a boss in *Shadow of the Erdtree*. The horns covering its body suggest that beneath the lion costume are a pair of Omen, large, ogre-like creatures afflicted by a curse and shunned by the followers of the Erdtree.



THE WICKER MAN

7 This figure is directly referenced by Miyazaki, who calls it "a terrible weapon" that was "used in a war that occurred in the Land of Shadow". The burning stuff inside is "the remains of bodies that were put in there to burn".

PATH OF DAGGERS

8 Throwing weapons are plentiful in *Elden Ring*, but are also typically consumable items. These throwing daggers will apparently turn all your attacks into throwing attacks, though it isn't clear whether the daggers will still be consumed like arrows from a quiver.

WINGING IT

9 One of the last scenes in the trailer shows the player character sprouting a set of wings to battle Messmer. This ability looks similar to one used by the Crucible Knights. Perhaps *Shadow of the Erdtree* will shed more light on these warriors.

STUCK IN YOUR HEAD

6 It isn't clear who this character is, although the clasp on his robe is seen being worn by an elderly man in a painting earlier in the trailer. Stabbing someone through the head with a big stake, however, is precisely what a character called Messmer the Impaler might do.

story events led it to becoming "physically disconnected" from the larger landmass.

The expansion's title, meanwhile, refers not to the literal shadow of the giant golden tree that looms over the Lands Between, but to a different tree that casts its pall over the Land of Shadow. Miyazaki describes the *Shadow of the Erdtree* as a "particular" entity "as opposed to" the original game's Erdtree. Although it isn't confirmed, there's a chance this tree is in fact a version of Miquella's Haligtree, an area visited by the player to the far north of the Lands Between. As we'll soon discuss, the elusive child demigod Miquella plays a central role in the expansion's story.

As for the Land of Shadow's size, Miyazaki describes it as "probably comparable, if not larger, than the area of Limgrave in the base game". Limgrave is *Elden Ring*'s opening region, and can take around 30 hours for new players to explore fully. But Fromsoft aims to imbue the Land of Shadow with denser design than *Elden Ring*'s existing regions. While the expansion will have a similar structure to these areas, featuring "open field maps with large scale legacy dungeons, and with small to medium scale legacies as well," Miyazaki has also said he wants to bring "these types of layouts together a little more seamlessly". Hence, expect the Land of Shadow to have more verticality and knottier pathways than *Elden Ring*.

One of *Elden Ring*'s biggest attractions was its grand, yet cryptic, fantasy tale, which drew from a story written by George RR Martin as the foundation for the game's lore. According to Miyazaki, Martin hasn't contributed any new material for the expansion, but he says that the "mythos that he created [is] involved in the creation of *Shadow of the Erdtree* in the same way". This is because FromSoftware only "took from a part" of Martin's story to create *Elden Ring*, while *Shadow of the Erdtree* derives from unused material in Martin's worldbuilding.

Specifically, *Shadow of the Erdtree* focuses on Miquella, a character alluded to in *Elden Ring* but never actually seen (at least, not alive). The son of Queen Marika and brother to Malenia (arguably *Elden Ring*'s toughest boss) Miquella was cursed to be eternally a child and created the vast Haligtree as a cure both to his permanent infantilism and Malenia's slowly rotting body. In *Elden Ring*'s story, Miquella was abducted by another boss character called Mohg, and taken to his palace deep underground. But in a quintessentially *Elden Ring* move, Miquella separated his spirit from his body, with the former escaping to the Land of Shadow.

MAIN: Miyazaki says the Land of Shadow will be "denser" than *Elden Ring*'s areas.

EMPYREAL MARCH

It isn't clear what Miquella's plans are in the Land of Shadow, but given how Fromsoft stories tend to roll, it's unlikely to be entirely benign. Although Miquella is portrayed as one of *Elden Ring*'s more likeable demigods in the base game, the DLC's trailer reveals that affability is the key to his power. The first spoken lines in the trailer refer directly to Miquella, stating, "Pure and radiant, he wields love to shrive clean the hearts of men. There is nothing more terrifying". It seems Miquella can compel people to like him.

Miquella isn't the only character central to *Shadow of the Erdtree*. The expansion will introduce several new faces. This will include bosses and likeminded adventurers who have followed Miquella to the Land of Shadow. The character we know most about outside of Miquella is Messmer the Impaler. Messmer is the flame-haired chap sat on the throne on the first page. Miyazaki describes

IT FOCUSES ON MIQUELLA, A CHARACTER ALLUDED TO IN ELDEN RING

GUESS THY ENEMY

Attempting to categorise the new enemies

HOG SENTINEL

This fellow looks reminiscent of the Tree Sentinels in *Elden Ring*, only he's riding a giant pig.

HIPORCUPINE

This creature can charge at players, but a power lets it generate huge spikes.

PALE RIDER

It's difficult to speculate what this thing is, although the horse is reminiscent of General Radahn's.

WORMLAD

It's a big worm, with arms, that eats you. Sorry, that's as much as I've got!

RIGHT: Looks like the Land of Shadow won't be all dark fields and gothic castles.

BELOW: *Shadow of the Erdtree* adds unarmed fighting options.

him as a "key figure" who "stands on equal footing to [the] other demigods and children of Marika".

Indeed, it's strongly implied that Messmer is another of Marika's children. His red hair is similar in hue to Malenia's, while his name follows the 'M' theme of all Marika's children. Moreover, in the trailer, the reveal of Messmer is dubbed over with the line, "Mother, wouldst thou truly lordship sanction in one so bereft of life?" Miyazaki says the DLC will explain "a little" about why Messmer is in the land of shadow and not in the Lands Between.

Alongside his role as a major character in the expansion's story, Messmer is one of ten new bosses that you'll fight across the Land of Shadow. As you'd expect from a FromSoftware DLC, battling them will be no cakewalk. Among these are several optional bosses which Miyazaki states are "tuned in a similar way to the likes of Malenia," arguably the most challenging encounter the studio has yet designed. High-level players won't be able to roll in and stomp these bosses either, as the expansion adds a new 'attack power' stat designed to mediate your progression across the Land of Shadow. .

Shadow of the Erdtree will arrive on June 21. There's no better time than the height of winter to take a holiday to a land of shadow.

GUIDED BY GRACE

Why we love FromSoftware's colossal RPG ELDEN RING

By Rick Lane

Land of open glory

FromSoftware applies its world design to a realm of vast scale

Exploration has always been a part of FromSoftware's games, but *Elden Ring* puts pushing toward the horizon at the front and centre of its design. Like most of the studio's games, *Elden Ring*'s key areas are guarded by brutally tough bosses. But *Elden Ring* doesn't expect you to beat them through pure skill or grinding attrition. Instead, the emphasis is on tracking down the tools that will help you overcome the challenge and gradually accrue power.

To this end, FromSoft builds a world that seeps adventure from every crag and crevice. Crucially though, The Lands Between aren't simply large and beautiful. Since the days of *Demon's Souls*, FromSoftware has exhibited a knack for infusing the familiar with the strange, beauty with horror, grandeur with corruption. *Elden Ring* takes these ideas and pushes them to the extreme. Each region of the map is at once a glittering pastiche of fantasy tropes, and a blighted perversion of those same ideas. Liurnia of the Lakes might seem like a fairytale idyll when you first glimpse its glorious panorama from the cliffs behind Stormveil Castle, but all that changes when you see how the magic of Raya Lucaria has warped the creatures that lurk in its marshland.

In this manner, each area finds its own ways to challenge and surprise. A small shrine hidden in a forest might prove to be the gateway to a lost city, while a rise in Limgrave's landscape can conceal the vast wasteland that is Caelid. As you push deeper, the obstacles you faced early on become tiny dots in the landscape, encouraging you to think back to those early hours battling against them, and how impossible they seemed all those hours ago.

Lore of the Ring

Following the golden thread reveals a tale of godly intrigue

E*lden Ring* unspools its story in a way much like other FromSoftware games, using item descriptions, visual references, and enigmatic dialogue to communicate a fragmentary narrative to the player. But like the game's giant, omnipresent Erdtree, *Elden Ring*'s story has a clear presence above the surface, while its roots are knotty, and hard to unpick.

On the surface, *Elden Ring* presents as a typical fantasy quest to reforge the Elden Ring and restore the Lands Between to their former glory, as ordained by the Erdtree's faithful Golden Order. But as you'd expect from a story coauthored by Hidetaka Miyazaki and George RR Martin, all is not necessarily as it seems. As you travel across the land, you encounter multiple different factions, each with their own aspirations for power and the fate of the Lands Between, from the followers of Ranni the Witch, whose desire to escape her destiny had dire consequences for herself and the world as a whole, to the recusants of Rykard, Lord of Blasphemy, who shun the faith that has built up around the Erdtree, and seek to murder those who would restore the Elden Ring.

AS YOU TRAVEL, YOU ENCOUNTER MULTIPLE DIFFERENT FACTIONS

The game's deeper lore combines the political intrigue of George RR Martin's own fantasy epics with the celestial scheming of the Greek and Norse pantheons. The assimilated history and mythology of the Lands Between is a bloody mess of godly family drama, religious schisms, love affairs, exiles and wars.

How much of this you uncover is largely up to you, and even pursuing every nugget of lore will still leave gaps unfilled. This room *Elden Ring* leaves for interpretation has led to some player theories about the themes for *Elden Ring*'s world. One suggests the game's lore is rooted in mycology, and that the Erdtree is in fact a giant fungus feeding off a stratum of death beneath the earth. Another posits that the Lands Between reflects the symbolism of alchemy, and that the Tarnished's quest is an allegory for the pseudoscience of transforming base materials into pure substances.

Jolly cooperation

The real Elden Ring was the friends we made

E*lden Ring* is a largely solitary experience. But that makes its fleeting moments of connection all the more precious. Encountering fellow adventurers like Blaidd and Alexander, Warrior Jar offer welcome moments of companionship in a land that is generally hostile. FromSoftware has a knack for building relationships with such characters in a few lines of dialogue, although it helps that *Elden Ring* lets you summon these friends into numerous boss encounters. Indeed, *Elden Ring* has one of the best cooperative fights in the whole FromSoft canon, with the festival of Radahn letting you bring all your pals for a collective slugfest against *Elden Ring*'s cosmic general.

Of course, it isn't only NPCs who can help you in a fight. *Elden Ring* includes FromSoft's unique approach to multiplayer, which lets you summon other players to fight with or against you. Some of these players have gone on to become legendary figures in their own right, such as the pot-headed samurai Let Me Solo Her, who has helped countless players defeat Malenia.

Elden Ring also innovates on cooperative battle through the Spirit Ashes mechanic, which lets you select from a wide array of summons to help you in battle. These range from packs of wolves through sorcerers, to a ghostly clone of your own character. Indeed, the Mimic Tear version of myself became as close a companion on my adventure as any of the more established characters in the Lands Between.

Colossal encounters

The enormous world allows for equally huge battles

Like all FromSoftware games, *Elden Ring* has a fantastic array of boss fights. But its much broader scope also facilitates some battles of truly epic scale. Some of the key boss fights are properly massive affairs. Most notable is your duel with Starscourge Radahn on the dunes at the fringes of Caelid, although the confrontation with Rykard, Lord of Blasphemy is similarly spectacular, if less challenging. The battle against the Fire Giant high up in the mountains also falls into this category, although this is generally regarded as one of the weaker boss fights in *Elden Ring*.

Nonetheless, many such encounters also happen while wandering around the world itself. The Lands Between are watched over by towering golems, whose ponderous movements and powerful attacks are clearly inspired by 2005's *Shadow of the Colossus*. Then there are the walking mausoleums whose ringing bells can be heard halfway across the map, and whose enormous stone feet can easily crush you as you attempt to cut them down. My favourite encounters in *Elden Ring*'s open fields, however, are the dragons. Battles against these overgrown lizards are always incredibly dramatic, making excellent use of the game's mounted combat.

This time, it's personal

Exploring Elden Ring's varied RPG systems

***Elden Ring* is generally regarded as the most accessible of FromSoftware's games, but it would be more precise to say that it is the most flexible. Its emphasis on rewarding exploration also gives it the widest scope for character building, and FromSoftware go to great lengths to ensure all pathways to victory are equally rewarding.**

In particular, *Elden Ring* is easily the most enjoyable FromSoftware game to play with a magic user build. The game's voluminous spell book includes some truly astonishing sorceries, such as Comet Azur and Rennala's Full Moon, both of which let you launch celestial objects at your foes. Putting points into the Faith stat likewise unlocks a massive library of incantations, letting you wield the powers of dragons, or embrace the Frenzied Flame to defeat enemies by driving them mad.

Which isn't to say melee builds get a short shrift in *Elden Ring*. Quite the opposite. Alongside the game's extensive arsenal of melee weapons, *Elden Ring* introduces the Ashes of War. These collectable abilities attach to specific weapon types, imbuing them with unique abilities. Some of these enhance weapons with specific techniques, such as thrusting a greathammer into the ground to unleash a devastating shockwave, or facilitating a powerful somersaulting attack that can stagger the toughest foes.

Other Ashes enable limited use of magic, letting you call down lightning strikes or summon a phalanx of magical daggers that target nearby enemies.

There's enough leeway in *Elden Ring*'s levelling that you don't have to commit to one playstyle straightaway, and can combine different stat-based skills with weapons and Ashes of War to create highly specific fighting styles. None of this, of course, guarantees easy victory against the game's bosses. But *Elden Ring* never demands you fight them in a specific way, and if you're struggling in a particular fight, there's always another tactic you can try.

SOME OF THE KEY BOSS FIGHTS ARE PROPERLY MASSIVE AFFAIRS

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

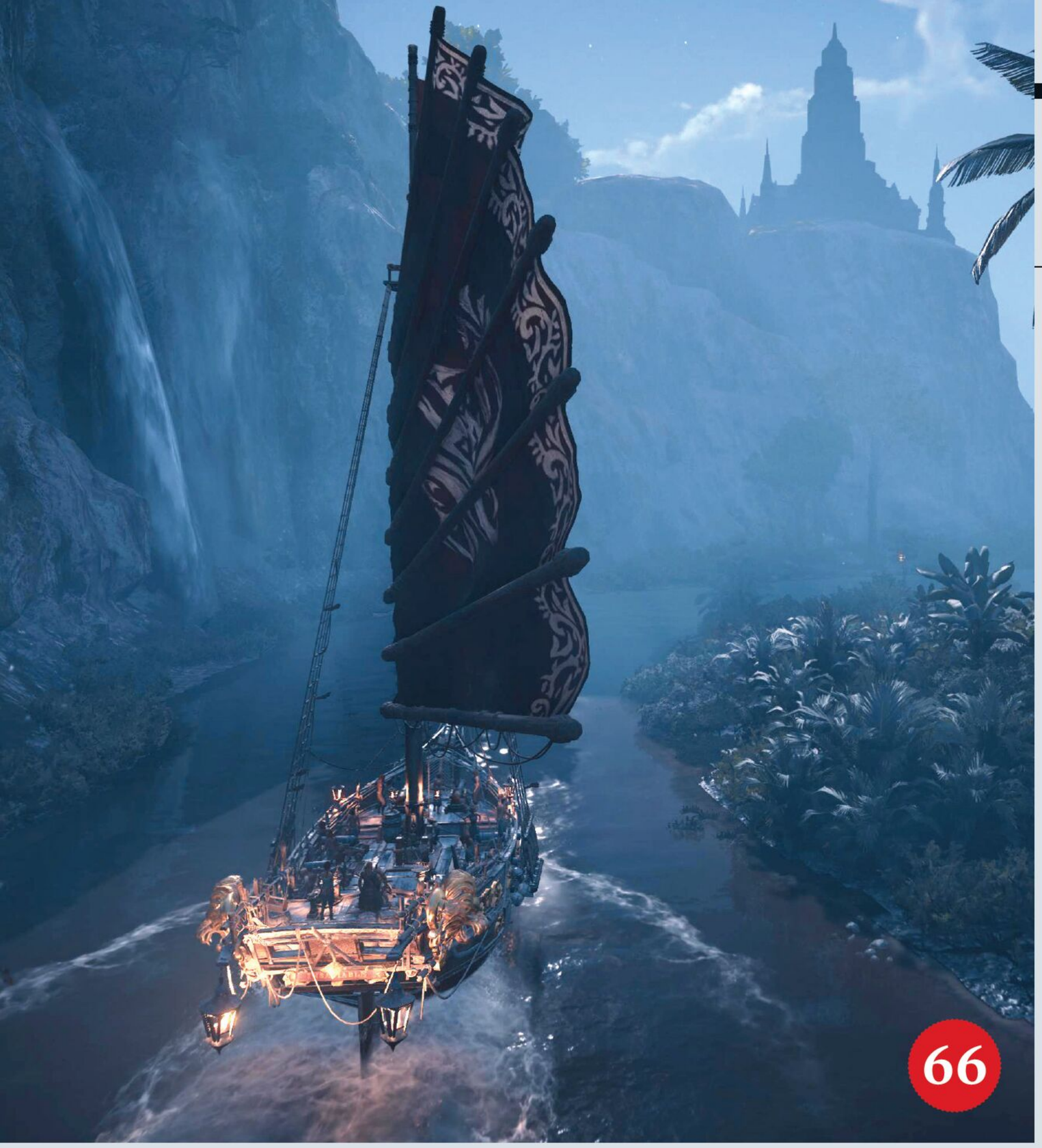
Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

Road warrior

We don't know about you, but we here spend far too much time behind the wheel of our cars. And not in a pleasurable way, but a 'school runs and commuting' type of way. And, worse, when we're not driving we're fixing up the car to keep it roadworthy for more driving.

Thank goodness therefore that it's easy to spend spare time getting behind the wheel of a virtual car... wait a minute... [checks notes] and also spend time fixing up the virtual car... [checks notes again] hey, are we sure this is right, guys?

The thing is, though, as our *Pacific Drive* review shows, this is a fantastic game about fixing up, driving and making a personal bond with a car that's loaded with character, in a game that's packed with personality and quality. It's a unique experience not to be missed.



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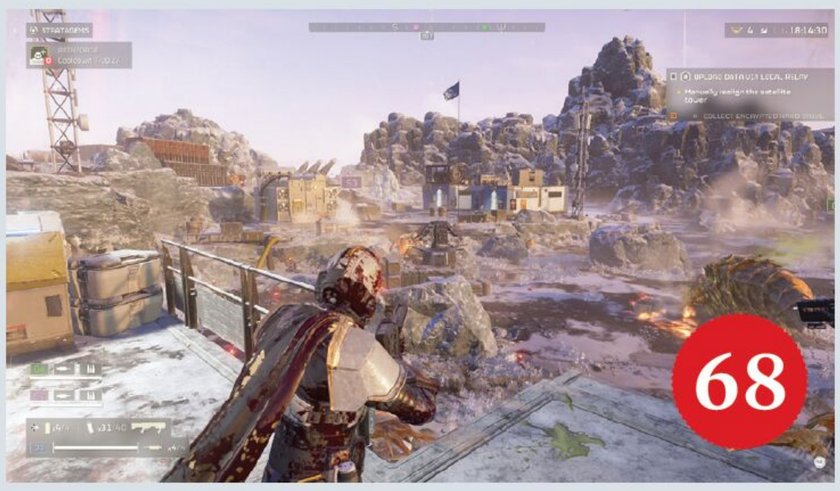
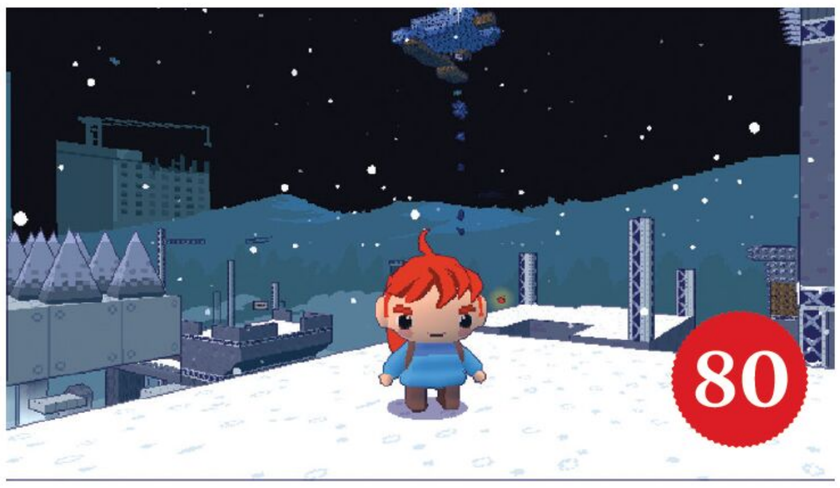




This month's buccaneering reviewers...

CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Specialist in
Stroking camshafts
Currently playing
Pacific Drive
This month
Legally married a Buick Estate. We all went to the wedding.

KERRY BRUNSKILL
Specialist in
Backflipping with guns
Currently playing
Tomb Raider
This month
Shot bats, lots of bats. Oh, and in *Tomb Raider I-III* she went and...

SHAUN PRESCOTT
Specialist in
Pieces of eight
Currently playing
Skull & Bones
This month
Shopped for parrots on Tortuga. A pirate must have an on-trend feathered friend.

JON BAILES
Specialist in
Mindless patriotism
Currently playing
Helldivers 2
This month
Dispensed FREEDOM and DEMOCRACY muchly and with extreme prejudice.

HEATHER NEWMAN
Specialist in
Midnight operations
Currently playing
Persona 3: Reload
This month
Spent far too long giving cutey Koromaru tickles behind the ears. Stayed up very late.

FAST & CURIOUS

Repair, improve and pilot a quirky station wagon in survival game PACIFIC DRIVE

By Chris Livingston

With sincere apologies to the Magnum Opus from *Mad Max*, the Saud Kruger Orca passenger liner from *Elite Dangerous* and Arthur Morgan's horse, I have a new favourite ride: the station wagon in *Pacific Drive*. It's amazing.

It didn't look like much at first: just a typical late '80s family wagon with wood panelling and a hatchback trunk. But over the course of the last 35 hours I've turned it into an armour-plated, radiation-resistant tank positively bristling with sci-fi gadgets. And it's only a little bit haunted.

Those upgrades (and the ghosts in the shell) are the result of barrelling through a hellscape of nightmarish weather, crumbling roads, and more horrifying anomalies per square mile than the entire *STALKER* trilogy combined. *Pacific Drive*, the debut game from developer Ironwood Studios, is a first-person driving survival game in which you explore a spooky and deadly exclusion zone to gather the resources you need to soup up your ride.

I'm declaring it right now: the station wagon in *Pacific Drive* is one of the best vehicles in videogames, ever. Unfortunately you have to spend a lot of time leaving it behind to run around on foot, and that's where the game falters a bit. But when you're roaring through the hostile world in that glorious, ridiculous wagon, *Pacific Drive* puts an exciting and fresh new spin (ha ha, because tyres) on the survival genre.

JOY RIDE

After mysterious science experiments in Washington state's heavily forested Olympic Peninsula went horribly awry, the government built a towering concrete wall around it and called it quits. Trapped inside the barricades of what's now called the Olympic Exclusion Zone, you've got nothing but your clunker, a workbench in a dimly lit garage, and the guidance of a few oddball scientists who chat to you (and each other) over the radio.

Nearly all of the survival systems are focused on your car

The zone isn't an open world: it's broken up into maps called junctions, with crumbling roads that wind through foggy pine forests, misty marshes, and charred hills. The only hope of escape is to explore the world one junction at a time, scavenging for supplies among the cluttered cabins, rusted car frames, and abandoned science workshops the government left behind. Back at your garage you use what you find to craft new and better car parts, research new tech, and repair any damage your wagon sustained on the journey. Most junctions will open up roads to new ones, and your map of the zone will slowly grow until you can chain together long multi-junction trips deep into the peninsula.

The zone, meanwhile, is furious that you're there and will do whatever it can to stop you from leaving alive. Bizarre and deadly anomalies populate these junctions, from crackling electrical entities that crawl along the ground and fry your car's electronics to massive spreading patches of deadly radiation that sap your health. Hovering mechanical monstrosities with dangling magnets yank your car off the road and drag it into the trees, while other entities will try to disassemble it completely by ripping off doors and bumpers. Tremendous weather events can arrive in moments with wind gusts so strong they'll push your car off the road, while geyser-like anomalies blast gobs of green goo into the air to rain down on you. These aren't separate events. These things can all happen at once and it's... a lot.

Developer Ironwood Studios seems to even know how rough its game can get, too: one biome's attributes are labelled 'Exhausting Explosions'. They sure were. That's an outlier though. Usually I found *Pacific Drive* a thrilling challenge, leaping out of my wagon to loot a building or peel the steel off an abandoned car, scurrying back just as a hovering menace began descending upon me, and flooring it while veering left and right to avoid spiky anomalies chewing through the ground, my dashboard bathed in sparks from an electrical blast. Gritting my teeth, praying my car's faltering parts would hold on just a few seconds more as I careened through the trees to reach a safe exit just as a mega storm hit. Exhilarating.

IRRADIATOR FLUID

In *Pacific Drive* nearly all of the survival systems are focused on your car. You, the driver, have a health bar... and that's it. Your wagon, however, is a network of wonderfully modelled vital organs. Doors, panels, ≫

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A singleplayer first-person driving survival game with maybe the best car ever

EXPECT TO PAY
$43.95

DEVELOPER
Ironwood Studios

PUBLISHER
Kepler Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-9700K, , 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4070 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
pacificdrivegame.com

FOUR-TO-SIX WHEEL HEAVEN

Other top vehicles in PC gaming

SCOUT CAR
HALF-LIFE 2
This dune buggy was one of the most memorable parts of *Half-Life 2*, carrying the player across beaches, coastal roads and dirt tracks in style.

MAKO
MASS EFFECT
Yes, this six-wheeled tank-turned-utility vehicle handled like crap, but it sure made traversing alien worlds quicker and squishing enemies easy.

MIGHTY FOOT
DUKE NUKEM FOREVER
The game it's in is mostly memorable for the wrong reasons, but crushing aliens with Duke's truck was plenty of fun.

Diagnosing quirks and problems can get interesting.

I'm sure it's going to be fine. Yep, no worries at all.

LEFT: *Pacific Drive* can be absurdly pretty at times.

BELOW LEFT: *Half-Life 3* confirmed!

Taking a breather between dodging deadly anomalies.

It's not a looker, but it's all yours to upgrade and mod.

RIGHT: Every aspect of the car slowly wears out over time, needing to be replaced.

BELOW RIGHT: Scavenging for materials is crucial, but you're vulnerable outside of the car.

Chaos can happen at any time.

Better make sure you've got enough juice for car lights.

bumpers, windows, tyres and other parts and pieces each have their own health bar and are susceptible to physical, electrical, acid, or radiation damage, plus loads of other status effects: tyres can go flat, fuel tanks can leak, batteries can short out, wheels can become loose.

And no matter how diligently you tend to your car's bumps and scrapes, over time everything slowly wears out. Just like in real life, you can patch a flat tyre repeatedly but eventually it will go bald and have to be replaced. The durability system is rough, but I kinda love that components in *Pacific Drive* eventually die. Duct tape and a blowtorch can prolong the life of a part, but not forever. It feels fair.

Leaving your car feels like a vulnerable, naked act

What's the equivalent of eating and drinking, for cars? Fuel and electricity, I guess, and I've done everything I can to keep my car's metal belly full of nutrition. I have a battery under the hood but also one on the roof and a third mounted in the back seat. I have two ridiculous gizmos I crafted and lashed to the sides of my car: a turbine to capture wind power, and a sci-fi gadget that somehow converts rainwater into electricity. That's science, right?

The important thing is that while driving in the wind and rain my battery will now slowly recharge itself. I'm a good car dad. I'm feeding my beautiful wagon-child.

A full battery is massively important because I've got other crafted science gizmos crammed all over my car, and they need tons of juice, including a resource radar that can pinpoint the junk I need during supply runs, which makes each excursion more of a surgical strike than a cross-my-fingers search. I have a massive floodlight mounted on the side of the car for night missions, and a device that synthesises fuel from the zone's weird atmosphere.

I also have a literal lifesaver: a device that heals me when I'm sitting in the driver's seat, which is much better than standing outside the car and using a health kit. Best of all, I've got a forcefield I can activate that keeps those damn hovering anomalies from grabbing parts of my car and absconding with them.

Here's an actual quote from me the first time I watched those gross monsters trying to latch onto my car with their tentacles only to bounce harmlessly off my glowing energy shield, "Ha ha ha! Suck it!" I love this damn car.

Adorning my car with batteries and generators solves some problems but creates others. That roof battery and resource radar don't leave room for, say, a massive secondary fuel tank or storage container big enough to fit a set of spare tyres in. That means more time spent refuelling and patching damaged wheels, which means more time standing outside with anomalies bearing down on us.

Before each trip I need to spend time thinking about which attachments will be the most useful based on what I've learned about the zone's different junctions and hazards. Planning is important.

THE BUICK ESTATE STATION WAGON

The car that most influenced Pacific Drive's four-wheel star

One of the longest-running types of station wagon available in the USA, the Buick Estate was first introduced in 1940, with a model then brought to market in almost every year up until 1996. Multiple members of *Pacific Drive*'s development team experienced the Buick Estate at some time in their lives and, while making the game, bought one and photographed it to make the in-game car very detailed and authentic.

ODD IN 60 SECONDS

Repairs aren't the only attention you have to lavish on your car: your wagon will also develop 'quirks' due to exposure to the bizarre reality of the zone. My car's first quirk developed while I was in the zone in the middle of the night, already jumping in fear at every groan or creak from the woods. As I ran back to my car I noticed the passenger door was open – weird, I was pretty sure I hadn't opened it. I began getting paranoid as I noticed it open again a bit later. My mind raced: did something invisible get into the car?

Eventually I discovered that whenever I got out of my car the passenger door would pop open. It was a quirk, and not the last my car would contract. Diagnosing and curing quirks is handled with a fun minigame in the garage.

STEP ON IT

Much as I love driving my quirky car through the zone and tending to its every need in my garage, the actual act of gathering all those resources does eventually become a bit of a trudge. There's a thrill to scavenging for a while: leaving your car feels like a vulnerable, naked act as you scuttle fearfully into a building to collect junk or scrap the doors and tyres off a wreck. As anomalies and storms begin closing in, adrenaline will make the act of looting a cabin feel like a frantic and fun race against the clock.

I occasionally wish there were more ways to generate a few much-needed items at my garage like in other survival games. But then, this is a driving game, not a farming game. If I need something, I've gotta hit the road. Yes, the occasional overly-brutal zone excursion may leave me exasperated, and sometimes the resource collection tasks feel heavily repetitive, but they can't overshadow my fondness for this silly sci-fi station wagon. I'm always thrilled to roar back into the zone for another fruitful mission or frightful failure, and I'll happily spend ages in the garage repairing and replacing every single component using scrap metal, duct tape, and lots of love. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A novel and challenging survival game that puts you in the driver's seat of one the best cars in videogames.

86

LOST ARC

TOMB RAIDER I-III REMASTERED brings ancient treasures back into the light

By Kerry Brunskill

Lara Croft may need no introduction, but her first three artefact-swiping, wildlife-bothering, lever-pulling adventures were in real danger of becoming exactly the sort of forgotten relics she hunts for. *Tomb Raider I-III Remastered* hauls this trio of excellent action-adventure-puzzle hybrids and their original expansions – foundational examples of a style of game we're still enjoying today – back into action. This is the definitive version of these games, feeling both 25+ years old and also brand new at the same time.

Tomb Raider I-III Remastered runs fantastically: whether played on PC or Steam Deck, it scales to whatever my current display's maximum resolution is without effort or fuss. No matter how long I played or how many times I jumped between games, saves, or hardware, it never did anything other than work exactly as intended.

It never did anything other than work exactly as intended

The framerate didn't wobble even when I was mashing the game's dedicated graphics toggle button, seamlessly switching back and forth between the tastefully updated (and default) new look and the classic style, crude 2D keys and all. It works at any moment and is flawless.

These little sharp-edged worlds are the perfect place to play out all of my wildest Indiana Jones fantasies. At times they're as quiet as a tomb, the only sound Lara's grunts as she carefully picks her way across ancient pillars or shoves a stone block into place. But five minutes later she might be firing her iconic dual pistols at dinosaurs, or desperately running away from a crushing wall covered in spikes. Within the space of half an hour I'll have acted like a hero, an adventurer, a puzzle-solving genius... and an idiot who might have slightly misjudged that last jump and sent Lara plunging to her doom. Again.

OLD RAIDER, NEW TRICKS

Going in I assumed I'd spend most of my time in the retro mode's comfy familiarity. It's how these *Tomb Raider*s really look, after all, and I'm a big fan of early 3D in general, especially when it's handled as well as it is here, the right-angled environments clothed in pin-sharp pixelated textures, the lighting, skyboxes, boxy character models. Even the draw distance is just realistic enough to convey cracked stone, running water and broken tiles, but still leaves room for my imagination to have a great time filling in the gaps. I was surprised to find I was generally happy to leave the remastered graphics on, and more often than not impressed by the subtle (and not-so-subtle) enhancements that came with them.

On the whole this remaster straddles the line between retro authenticity and shiny modernity shockingly well, the repetitively tiled landscapes instantly recognisable without looking like a complete eyesore on modern screens. New 3D foliage, spider webs, items, light shafts and other miscellaneous details that were previously either painted onto ground, presented as flat objects, or simply nonexistent are so well integrated it's easy to believe they were always there.

For all the things I'm glad they've so very carefully kept – the ability to save/load anywhere, the timeless soundtrack, even the supremely creepy way the gaze of a mummified guardian will follow Lara around the room – some things really should have been left in the past. Running water sound effects are on the same short artificial loops with clear beginnings and ends, irritating to the point that some locations are more enjoyable with the sound muted. The camera is rarely better behaved than it was 25+ years ago, too.

Bosses have far too much health, and that only highlights how basic the gunplay is. The AI across all three games has no answer for highly skilled battle tactics like 'standing still somewhere they can't reach and holding down the fire button', 'jumping backwards while shooting' and 'bothering to equip the shotgun'.

Playing through these remasters confirms that the original trio of games really were as amazing as I remembered them being outside those very '90s flaws, though. Every puzzle solved felt like a well-earned victory, and the sneaky swerves these games pulled as they plunged Lara into an unseen trap remain exciting challenges. Simply nailing a risky jump (and a manual ledge grab) to avoid certain death is still a rush of adrenaline here, a tension modern adventure games have buffed out. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Three legendary action-adventure games given a loving makeover

EXPECT TO PAY
$43.95

DEVELOPER
Aspyr, Crystal Dynamics

PUBLISHER
Aspyr

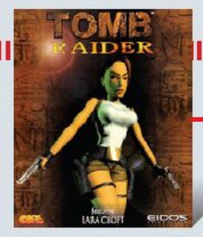
REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900HX, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No

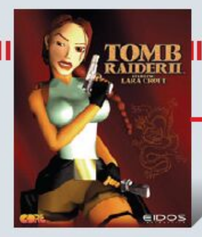
LINK
t.ly/2ID3W

TRILOGY TIMELINE

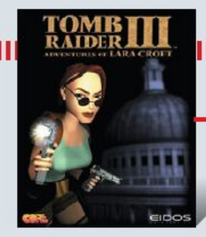
Three classic adventures in three years



TOMB RAIDER 1996
The original game sees Lara tasked with searching for an artefact called the Scion of Atlantis.



TOMB RAIDER II 1997
Lara must battle against a mysterious cult in order to discover the magical Dagger of Xian.

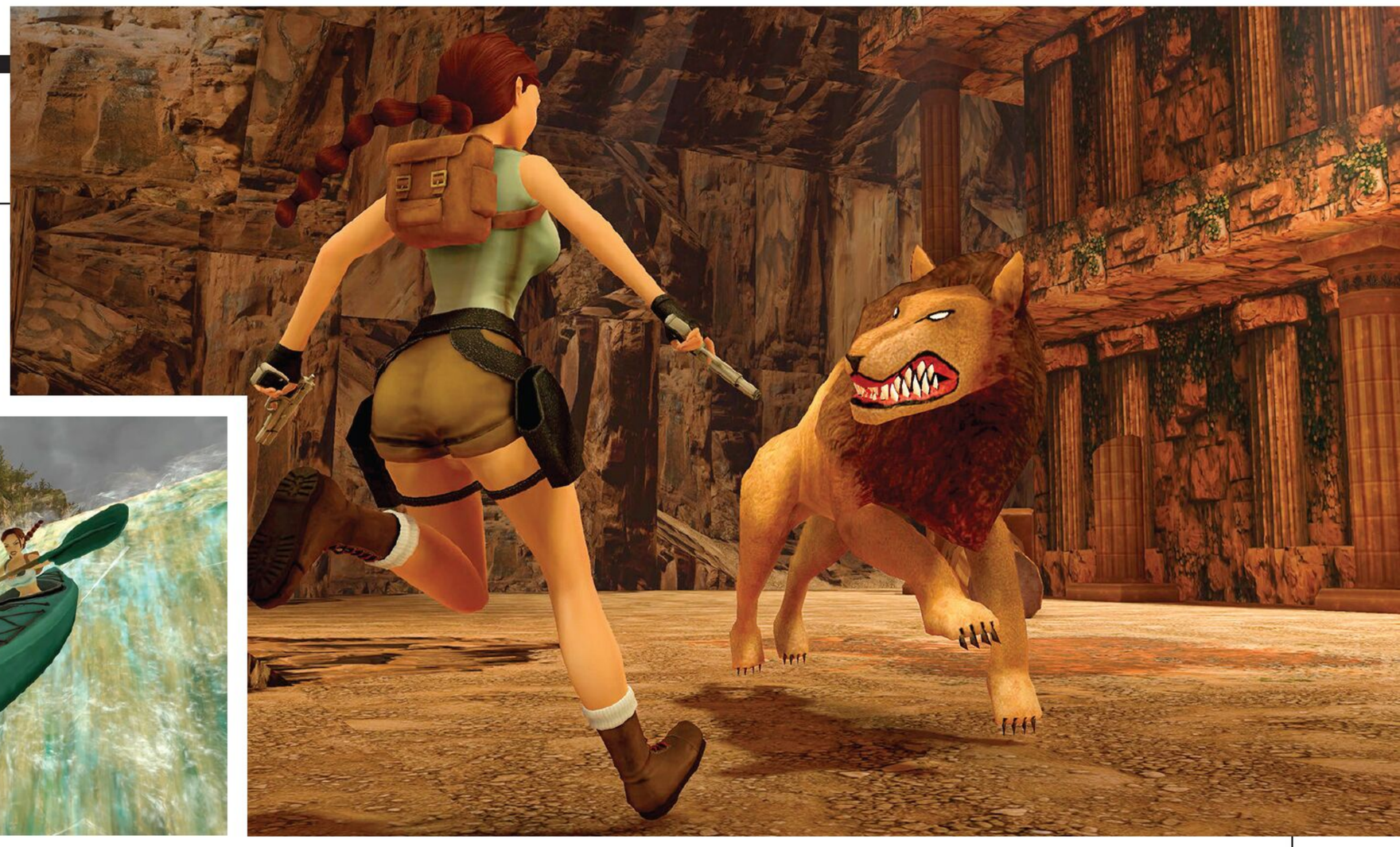


TOMB RAIDER III 1998
Follow Lara as she journeys across the world looking to recover four pieces of meteorite.

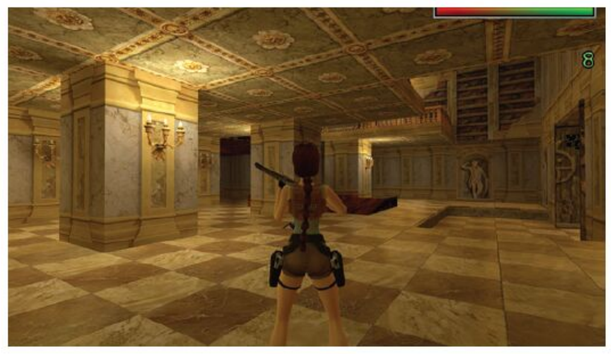
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Tomb Raider I-III Remastered is an impressive and authentic update. Too authentic in some places, though.

78



You can easily swap between old and new graphics.



ABOVE: Combat remains basic, often involving simply backflipping away from foes while firing.

LEFT: Prepare to once again engage with some classic puzzles.

ARR-RIGHT

SKULL AND BONES is a fun game that's hamstrung by today's live service conventions

By Shaun Prescott

The appeal of *Skull and Bones* is laser focused. It's about being on a boat. You have to want the fantasy of sailing big pirate boats and you need to not want much else for your time and money. You may come wanting to live the fantasy of being a ruthless waterborne pilferer, but to live that fantasy you first need to love sailing a boat in the direction of crafting materials.

In *Skull and Bones* you're allowed to get off your boat, but only to interact with vendors, mission-givers, mayhaps a buried treasure chest. In the vast island-dotted expanse of the Indian Ocean there are two major pirate settlements where blacksmiths, carpenters, refiners, and most contracts (missions) are doled out, both for the main quest and its endgame component.

There's also a great rash of outposts that are functionally identical, playing host to a handful of vendors, the odd treasure chest and some perfunctory loot. You can't whip your sword out and get all cutthroat. No, your violent desire to misappropriate various hot 17th century commodities is all done from behind the wheel. In many ways, you don't sail a boat: you are the boat.

The Indian Ocean is ridden with competing French and Dutch colonists

After over a decade in development and with all the writing on the wall, I knew *Skull and Bones* would be *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag* by way of the waning full-price live service zeitgeist. I loved that older game. The boating around and the fighting with other boats lent a scale to the then-familiar *Assassin's Creed* format that seemed to blow salt up your nostrils and sand in your nether regions. It was richly atmospheric: you could smell it. *Skull and Bones* does recapture that atmosphere, but marrying it with the rigmarole of live service graft results in something lesser than that ten-year-old game.

ROCK THE BOAT

After the usual tutorial preamble I reach the island pirate haven of Saint Anne. During the opening hours I must prove myself to Scurlock, a grizzled pirate king with some hectic daddy issues. That involves sailing somewhere, blowing up a number of boats, plundering coastal settlements via the defence of a small pocket of water, and then reporting back to the boss, whose unfurling of corporate and criminal conspiracy has the whiff of a compelling narrative about it. The Indian Ocean is ridden with competing French and Dutch colonists, but it's also infested by other pirates and privateers (also other players in the 20-player server, but they can't attack you on sight). As a pirate it's your duty to stick it to them all.

Since I'm a boat I have four sides and space for a central launcher, though whether all slots can host weaponry depends on its class. Gradually, new weapons become available if I buy the blueprints for them. In combat, the weapons – whether cannons, ballistae, rockets and more – trigger contextually, so that if I'm facing frontwards to an enemy boat, shooting will trigger that weapon, rather than the ones at my sides. Most of the challenge lies in

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A live service take on ship-on-ship combat, with origins in an old cherished *Assassin's Creed* game

EXPECT TO PAY
$89.95

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Singapore

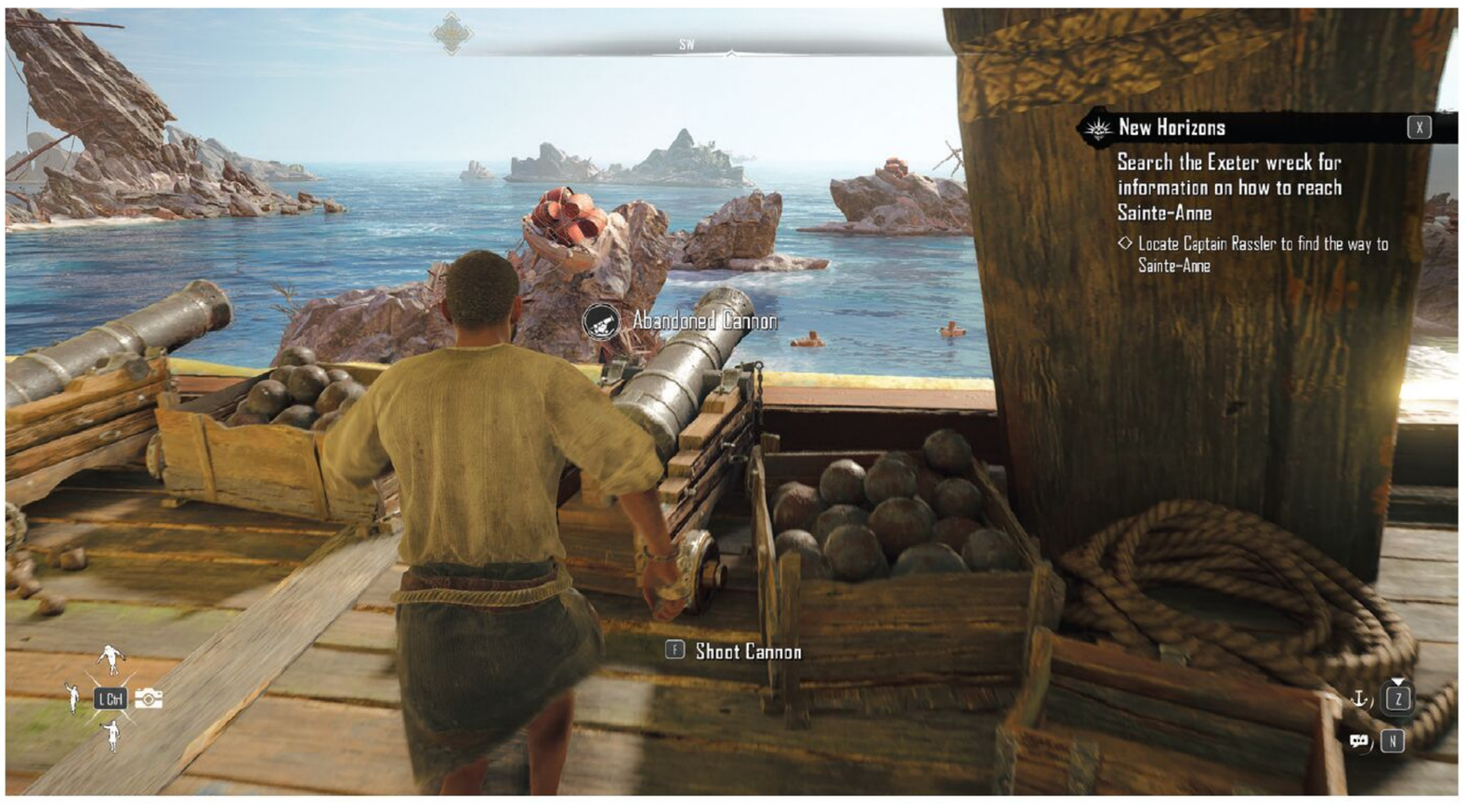
PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
t.ly/kTU3I

TOP: Weapons trigger contextually, dependent on which way your vessel is facing.



ABOVE: Plundering coastal settlements is a key part of the job.

FAR RIGHT: "What do you mean they've sold out of PCPP?!"

pro-actively manoeuvring my boat so that the cooldowns of each weapon have run their course when it matters. For more gruelling battles, planning for where all boats will be in 30 seconds' time is essential. This is often challenging because you're a massive boat, at the mercy of a massive boat's turning radius but also factors like wind, waves and the stamina of your crew.

The combat, when it's hairy, can be really tense and fun. In the early hours it can feel cumbersome, even horrible, until the logic of being a boat clicks. Ubisoft Singapore invented *Black Flag*'s (and *Assassin Creed 3*'s) boatfaring violence and the team has hit upon a great thing. Duking it out in the always tumultuous Open Seas region at night during fierce electrical storms is thrilling, especially when a rogue wave threatens to take out not only me but also the French bastards on my tail. The manoeuvring and the combat are gratifying, so long as one has the patience to control that boat through an endless parade of MMO-style quests.

SKULLGRINDER

In the spirit of modern live service game design, *Skull and Bones* never lets me perform a simple action when that action can be exploded into three separate actions across vast expanses of water. One does not simply buy anything in *Skull*

SHIVER ME TIMBERS!

Four other pirate games to try on PC

RETURN TO MONKEY ISLAND

Ron Gilbert's return to the point-and-click series that made him famous is buckets of piratical fun.

SEA OF THIEVES

If sailing around an archipelago in search of treasure with your mates sounds good then this is the pirate life for you.

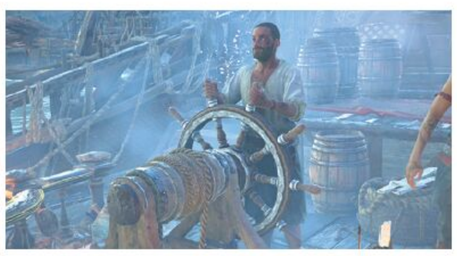
SID MEIER'S PIRATES!

If a slower paced, more strategic piratical life if what you crave then Sid's got the goods.

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV BLACK FLAG

Took naval combat to a new, more exciting level. Stab and shoot your way to booty.

"That be a pretty landscape, says I."



ABOVE: You know what they say, the bigger the wheel the bigger the steal.

FAR LEFT: Being a pirate is 78% having a strong beard. Fact.

and Bones that matters: one embarks on a (normally) mundane odyssey to make it.

Let me paint a picture of the mid-game: I want to buy another Basilisk II cannon, because I've been rewarded one gratis for reaching the Marauder Infamy rank. It's marginally more powerful than my current cannons, and adds a marginal amount to my boat's overall power rank which, like *Destiny*, is determined by the level of the gear I have equipped on top of its base rank. I need to raise my boat's rank to tackle a main quest I'm struggling with.

So I set sail for the settlement where the Basilisk II cannon blueprint is held, because everything built in this game first requires a blueprint. I arrive some ten minutes later via conventional sailing rather than fast-travelling, because the latter costs silver depending on the distance, and I'm skint (who am I paying to fast travel me? Does God offer this service? Or Ubisoft?). I arrive to retrieve my longed-for Basilisk II blueprint only to find I need to be the next rank of Infamy, Corsair, to even buy it. I can already equip it! But I cannot buy the blueprint to make another. This came with no forewarning and so pisses me off. I was already dreading the resource grind needed to build the Basilisk II once I had the blueprint, but now I need to

RULE'S GOLD

Five genuine rules as dictated by the pirate code

1. Pirates should keep their piece, pistols, and cutlass clean and fit for service.
2. Pirates should not game at cards or dice for money.
3. Pirates can only continue to drink after 8pm if on the open deck of their ship.
4. Pirates who desert their ship will be punished with death or marooning.
5. Pirates must settle fights on shore, never on their ship.

grind the rest of my Infamy rank out to get it.

GRAND THEFT BOAT

After I've won Scurlock's respect I move onto the second pirate hub, Telok Penjarah, to do the bidding of pirate kingpin and former admiral Rahma, who has a very big bone to pick with the Dutch. *Skull and Bones*' early criminal misanthropy gives way to a narrative about resistance to extractive colonialism, but aside from Rahma's occasional soliloquy, the tonal shift has no effect on what I do on a moment-to-moment basis: set off, sail a lot, and blow up other ships. It's during this second half of the game where *Skull and Bones*' lack of on-foot conflict starts to feel discordant.

Before the endgame, few are the baddies who will attack on sight because the various factions and colonial organisations don't remember who I am after I've lost their scent after any given skirmish. It's basically akin to the *GTA* wanted level model. Scurlock is always saying in the early game that I'm building a reputation among these French and Dutch water cops. He foreshadows a tense allegiance-based roleplay that never materialises, because there is actually no such thing as a 'reputation' in *Skull and Bones* unless tied to certain late-game narrative beats. No matter how many dozen or so lowly Compagnie I slaughter a little off shore of one of their settlements, I become an innocent ol' pirate boat once I've sailed out of sight.

It's disappointing that my actions don't affect the world or my standing in it. It makes the world feel like a playground for resource extraction – quite the thematic disjunct! – rather than a risky and remote expanse. The whole game amounts to doing a bunch of busywork to get bigger and steal more stuff. Maybe this is a kind of documentarian depiction of the workaday graft of piracy; maybe it's meant to be demystifying.

THE ENDGAME

The Black Market is introduced early on as a side hustle in robbing contraband, moving the spoils around with thieves in pursuit, and creating rum and opium from pillaged ingredients. But it re-emerges as the central theme of the endgame, introducing both PvP and PvPvE encounters that if completed, help build a network of Manufactories that generate a certain amount of *Skull and Bones*' endgame currency – Pieces of Eight – on an hourly basis.

PvP is often hilarious in a good way, especially in the PvPvE

Each of these Manufactories need to be funded with silver every in-game hour, and each pay-off in Pieces of Eight needs to be manually retrieved and brought back to a pirate haven, which is dangerous because by late game there are more attack-on-sight pirates lurking. All Manufactories and attendant leaderboards reset when the next season starts. There's a lot here for those who want to stick around.

PvP is often hilarious in a good way, especially in the PvPvE situations where there can be upwards of ten boats in a small body of water and the action is relentless. The campaign is a good time for boat enthusiasts, but for anyone after something more challenging than the sourcing of materials on the high seas, this is where the game gets good. It's naturally still tethered to a grind, but it's more varied and comedic, and requires more thought given to the optimisation of a boat's weaponry. If anything, it offers a decent bedrock for further updates and tweaks to the formula.

Doing this in a co-op crew is obviously more fun than doing it alone; the same can be said for any game. But teaming up ad-hoc with randoms who have vastly different ideas about what should be done across a big stretch of water means that it's rarely worth it, because no matter how close or far I am from those presumed collaborators, the strength of the enemy ships is greater. It rarely makes the higher loot payoff worth it. Bring a friend who'll stick around and not wander off, and the cooperative experience is worth it, so long as you like the friend. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

***Skull and Bones* offers moody and gratifying ship-on-ship combat with shallow live service game trappings.**

68

TOP: Character models frequently look great, with plenty of detail on show.

BUG HUNT

HELLDIVERS 2 is a masterful, hilarious squad shooter, when it works

By Jon Bailes

Picture the scene: four soldiers make a desperate scramble for their dropship on an alien planet, pursued by enormous, dagger-clawed bugs. Machine-gun fire rattles, green goo erupts, the landing pad teems with beasts as the quartet piles through the boarding hatch and their ride blasts off at the last available second. It could be a Hollywood action sequence, but in *Helldivers 2* it's merely the end of another mission.

Indeed, it's amazing just how often a *Helldivers 2* sortie climaxes in screaming, skin-of-the-teeth heroics. And it remains exciting time after time, because that Hollywood ending is never guaranteed. Maybe you get tagged yards from completing your great escape. Maybe by a spray of bullets from a wheeling teammate. Maybe the group's impossibly overrun, yet one of you somehow dives home and lives to tell the tale. Or maybe no one makes it at all.

STARSHIP BLOOPERS

It's not only the denouement of missions that make lasting memories either. In this four-player squad shooter (solo play is possible, but not much fun), every element harmonises explosively, resulting in scenes that really could have been choreographed for the movies. And, well, in a sense they were. *Helldivers 2* is unashamedly a mash of sci-fi action film tropes, with a large slice of Starship Troopers on proud display, sprinkles of Aliens and the Terminator series on top. Every line of its code works to recreate the feel of their scenes – panic, bravado, dark humour – through improvised mayhem.

You will be crushed, burned, impaled and blown up

Leaning into Starship Troopers' scenario is a smart choice for the tone of the game too. As with its predecessor, *Helldivers 2* apes Paul Verhoeven's 1997 satire at every turn, as citizens of Super Earth fight for freedom and democracy by offering their lives to the churn of endless war. True, the writing here is little more than a pale impression of its inspiration, yet it grants the action a glorious absurdity that sparks wild gambits and hilarity.

The appeal comes from the idea that, despite the propaganda, you aren't some Master Chief super soldier, but a hapless nobody, plunged into enemy territory to sacrifice yourself for vague ideals. You will be crushed, burned, impaled and probably blown up by equally out-of-their-depth teammates, so every onslaught you survive is a well-earned victory, and every death is a tragi-comic side effect of the situation. Besides, seconds after your demise, one of your squadmates calls in reinforcements, and before you know it you're barrelling down from orbit in a bullet-like capsule to rejoin the fray. Just hope they took care not to summon you near a pack of killer bugs or cyborgs.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The sequel to 2015's *Helldivers*, an online squad shooter inspired by Starship Troopers

EXPECT TO PAY
$59.95

DEVELOPER
Arrowhead Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Sony Interactive Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

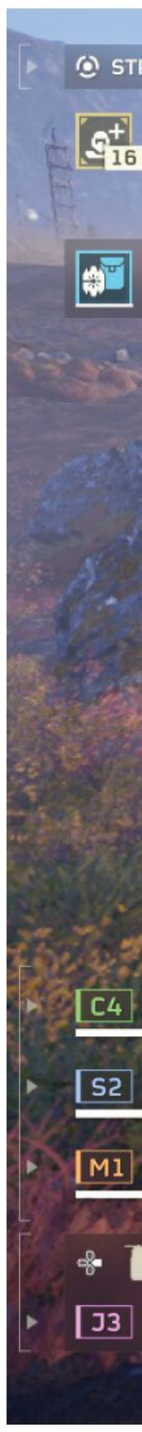
LINK
arrowheadgamestudios.com

HEAVY RAIN

One of the most consistently brilliant concepts in *Helldivers 2*, in fact, is that support always arrives from the sky, launched by your personal starship, which hangs like a satellite above your position. In many ways, this sequel is a remake of the first game with added live service progression and a switch of perspective, from top-down to over-the-shoulder, but that switch is a genuine game-changer, both because it makes the fights so much more up close and personal, and because of your connection with the heavens, as drops from above pepper the battlefield.

Not only do reinforcements arrive from on high – with a hefty thud that can smash fragile scenery or bugs – but so do what the game calls stratagems, which means equipment, heavy weapons and devastating firework displays of airstrikes and orbital laser fire. Each combatant selects four stratagems before landing, all restricted by cooldown timers, and managing these is the difference between being some schmuck holding an assault rifle and a few grenades, and a cackling exterminator who's a danger to insect, machine and human alike.

You see, air and orbital strikes are a quick way to decimate swathes of enemies, but equally the surest means of butchering your friends. You make the call by throwing a metal ball, which acts as the target point for the



DEATH FROM ABOVE *A selection of the tools of destruction*

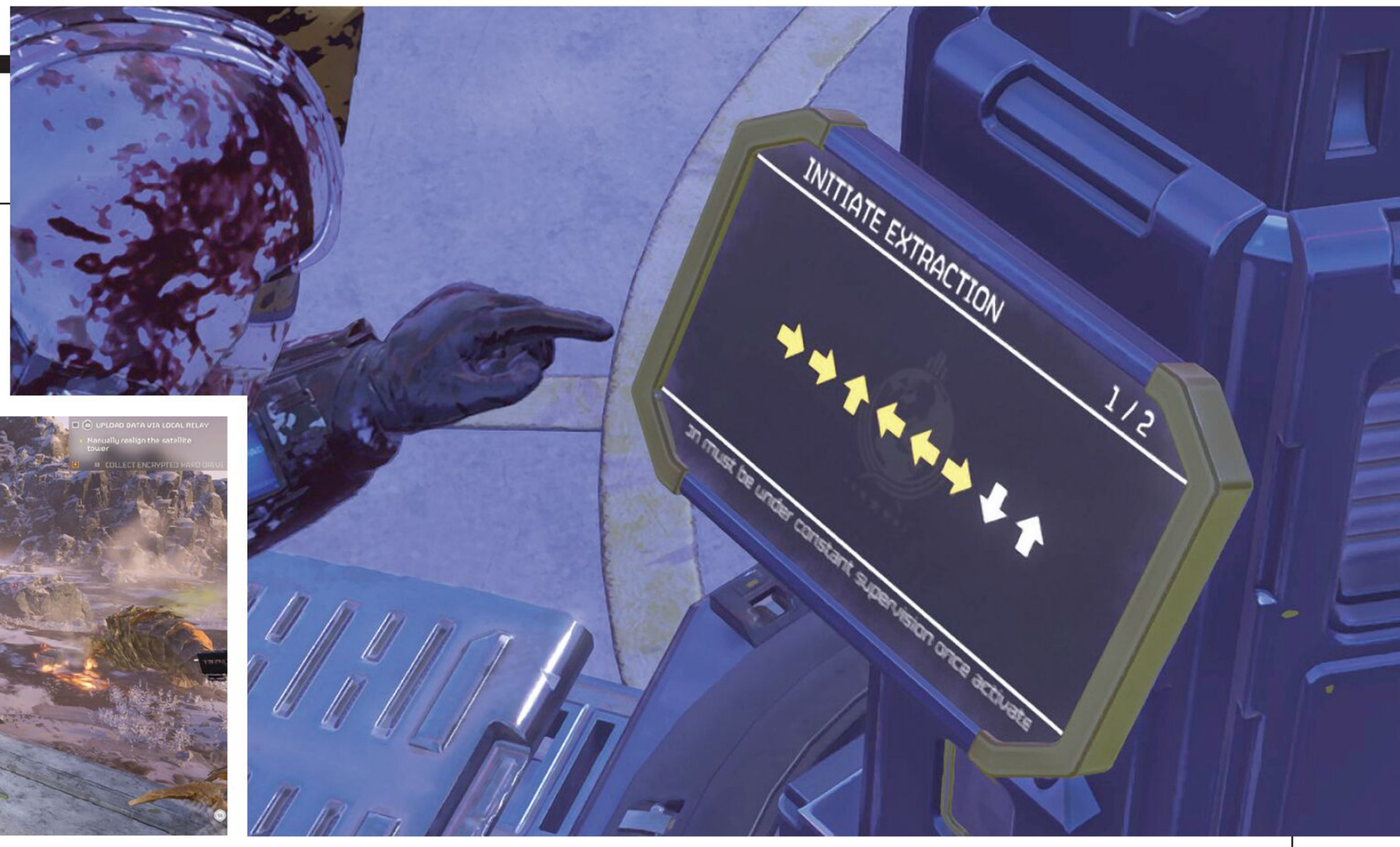
ORBITAL STRIKE
A brute-force earth scorcher from above, useful for taking out buildings as well as hostiles. Can also be used to coat an area in smoke or toxic gas.

EAGLE
A jet fighter is always ready to perform a deadly fly-by, hammering the ground with bullets or bombs as it goes. Steer well clear as it approaches.

AUTOMATED TURRET
A great choice when you're defending a position, thinning out crowds. It will only fire at enemies, but tough luck if you get in the way.

MINES
A pod scatters these around an area, and each one is visibly marked with a red light. That doesn't mean you'll always notice in the heat of battle, though.

HEAVY WEAPONS
From machine-guns to laser cannons and beyond, you'll need these to back up your standard kit. The largest models require assistance when reloading.



ABOVE: Mission objectives require a pause in the action to complete.

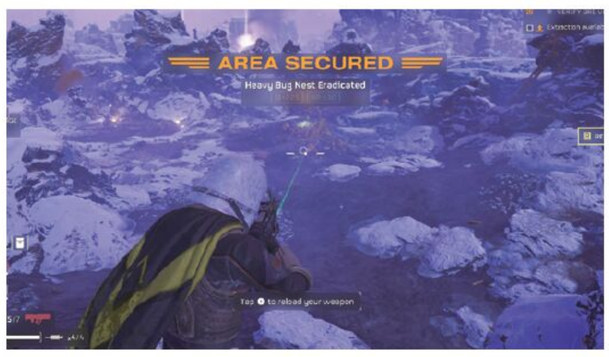
FAR LEFT: Commandeer turrets in bases to hold off enemy reinforcements.

BELOW: No need to shoot when you've got a personal guard drone.

ABOVE: When a teammate calls in an airstrike, get clear fast.

FAR RIGHT: Stay clear when the extraction shuttle lands, or get flattened.

BELOW: Bot troopers can arrive from any direction, including up.



barrage then a red beam appears from the sky and you have seconds to clear the area before the boom, the shake and a stunning display of smoke and flames. That red laser can thus be your saviour, or the harbinger of imminent death.

It's the same with automatic gun turrets, mine pods and beefy hand-held ordnance. You literally can't live without them, but their deployment might work against you, whittling down your reinforcement stock faster than the enemy could have hoped. And even with an organised squad, mistakes happen simply because skirmishes escalate so wonderfully stupidly quickly in *Helldivers 2*. One minute you're in tight formation, calmly pinging distant threats, the next you're diving behind a rock to avoid a charging beetle, its chums burrowing up on all sides, your team scattered. Before the dust settles, someone saves an ally from certain death, someone goes down in a blaze of suicidal glory, and of course someone punches an airstrike command and lobs the targeting device without checking your position first.

FIGHTING FIT

It's not any one element of *Helldivers 2* that makes it sing, however. They all conspire together. With the enemies, the numbers are huge – with framerate drops very rare – closing in like xenomorphs nesting in a reactor, but also the specifics of each kind force you to react differently, making you run, stand firm or dive to the dirt, scatter grenades or whip out a shotgun for close encounters. You learn that the bigger, deadlier creatures and androids have specific weak spots. Getting them in your sights is often a matter of using the terrain to your advantage or combining with a mate, one of you baiting the target while the other strikes from the rear.

Mission design, meanwhile, is involving and varied even at this early stage. From destroying bug nests or bot factories to grabbing soil samples or preparing the launch of an ICBM, objectives span multiple stages, which send you between traversing the sizeable maps to holding positions while stabbing inputs into terminals, manually moving machinery or waiting for processes to complete. Missions also offer sub-objectives, tempting you to boost your XP and currency rewards, with the caveat that enemy forces increase the longer you stay planetside. Such decisions can balance your efforts on a knife edge.

Monetisation is limited to armour, helmets and capes

The visuals and audio are spot on too. Each planet has a distinct personality – colour, natural cover, hazards, environmental features – while bugs are reliably disgusting and bots are as menacing as the Terminator influence implies. The sound is the star, though, from pitch-perfect gunfire, reload clacks and explosions, to the chitter and squeal of insects, the perfectly-timed "Eat this!" and "For democracy!" barks of your team, and a score that's equal parts jingoistic and dramatic. It's almost a shame to turn on your microphones, although advisable.

AIM TO SERVE

As for the service structure of the game, it doesn't feel intrusive yet and monetisation is limited to additional armour, helmets and capes. The endgame appears to involve the entire player base collaborating to liberate a spiral of planets around Earth – sorry, Super Earth – with a handful accessible at a time. Each time you finish a mission the completion target on that planet ticks up by one ten-thousandth of a percent, which is arguably the game's smartest piece of satire, showing you what your blood is worth. When a count reaches 100%, which happened only once in the first week after launch, that planet becomes unavailable and new ones open up. Presumably, developer Arrowhead has a hand on the dial here, ensuring progress isn't too fast or slow.

Still, after 20 hours of play, a sense of grind did begin to kick in a little. The quantities of XP and currencies required to level up and grab more powerful stratagems, weapons and armour push you towards higher difficulty levels, which are tough to manage without well-organised teams. It can feel like a bit of a Catch 22, in which you need better gear to tackle their challenge, but it's difficult to get that gear until you do.

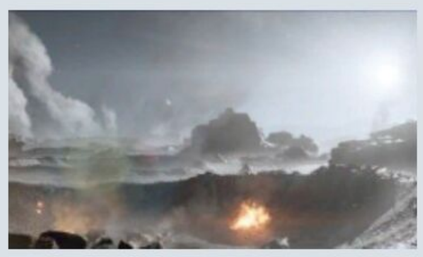
That said, there's no doubt progress has felt slower than it should in *Helldivers 2* so far due to technical hitches. Losing your connection as you make that run for the dropship after a 30-minute mission is infuriating, as is arriving home to find you've not been awarded the points you'd earned. Arrowhead is clearly paying attention, at least, and that latter bug seems to have been squashed. The biggest issue left at the time of writing is with accessing a quick match, which can take minutes of repeated trying and failing even though plenty of games are available. Indeed, the large number of people playing *Helldivers 2* is apparently causing the problem by overloading the servers.

That's less of a concern of course if you have a team of friends ready to dive with, and despite the hiccups, those initial 20 hours have been joyous. The prospect of unlocking more planets and more toys to play with, plus a hundred more last-ditch sprints to the dropship, is far more enticing than the vast majority of live service propositions. ■

WISH YOU WERE HERE?

The galaxy's finest tourist spots

ANGEL'S VENTURE
One of the closest planets to Super Earth, Venture boasts impressive autumnal vegetation.



FENRIR III
Far less lush, this moon is actually rather grey and barren for the most part.

ERATA PRIME
While it's mostly sand, the rock formations make for some spectacular views.

MALEVELON CREEK
More of a tropical climate here. Would be nice to explore if not for the bot factories and barbed wire.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Server issues aside, *Helldivers 2* is a bombastic, strategically engaging and funny squad shooter.

86

EDEN PROJECT

Death is just the beginning in BANISHERS: GHOSTS OF NEW EDEN

By Tom Sykes

B*anishers* imagines a world where the restless dead are a common occurrence, be they wisps, giant monsters or chatty ghosts bearing unfinished business. Much as you'd call a plumber to fix a leaky pipe, here you send for a Banisher to remove a troublesome spirit, either by hacking it to bits or peacefully ascending it to another plane of existence. They're basically Witchers, but without the genetic experiments that leave them emotionally bereft.

If anything, *Banishers* is a game that goes the other way, practically wallowing in the full emotional palette as you aid a landscape that has been torn apart by trauma. There's the trauma of the resident ghosts – many of which are literal manifestations of anger or sorrow – but also the trauma of the two main characters, Antea Duarte and Red mac Raith, who have recently been separated (in a manner of speaking) by Antea's death.

That death occurs shortly after the couple arrive at New Eden, a colony in 17th-century North America that has been beset by a terrible curse. A permanent winter has taken hold of the place, and the veil between life and death is wafer-thin, resulting in intrusions by violent spectres and the sudden death of their old friend, Charles Davenport. He has been killed by a powerful spirit that resides at the town meetinghouse, and so it's there that the Banishers head to, well, banish it.

Antea's death hardly stops her making an appearance

Alas, it doesn't go to plan and poor Antea is killed by the vengeful spirit, leaving Red alone on the outskirts of town, where he comes to after being heaved into the sea. So begins the long journey to both find the means to destroy the spirit, and return to town to reclaim Antea's body, which Red will need before he can send her spirit onwards.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A story-focused action RPG where you play as a ghost-hunter and his ghostly partner

EXPECT TO PAY
$79.95

DEVELOPER
Don't Nod

PUBLISHER
Focus Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

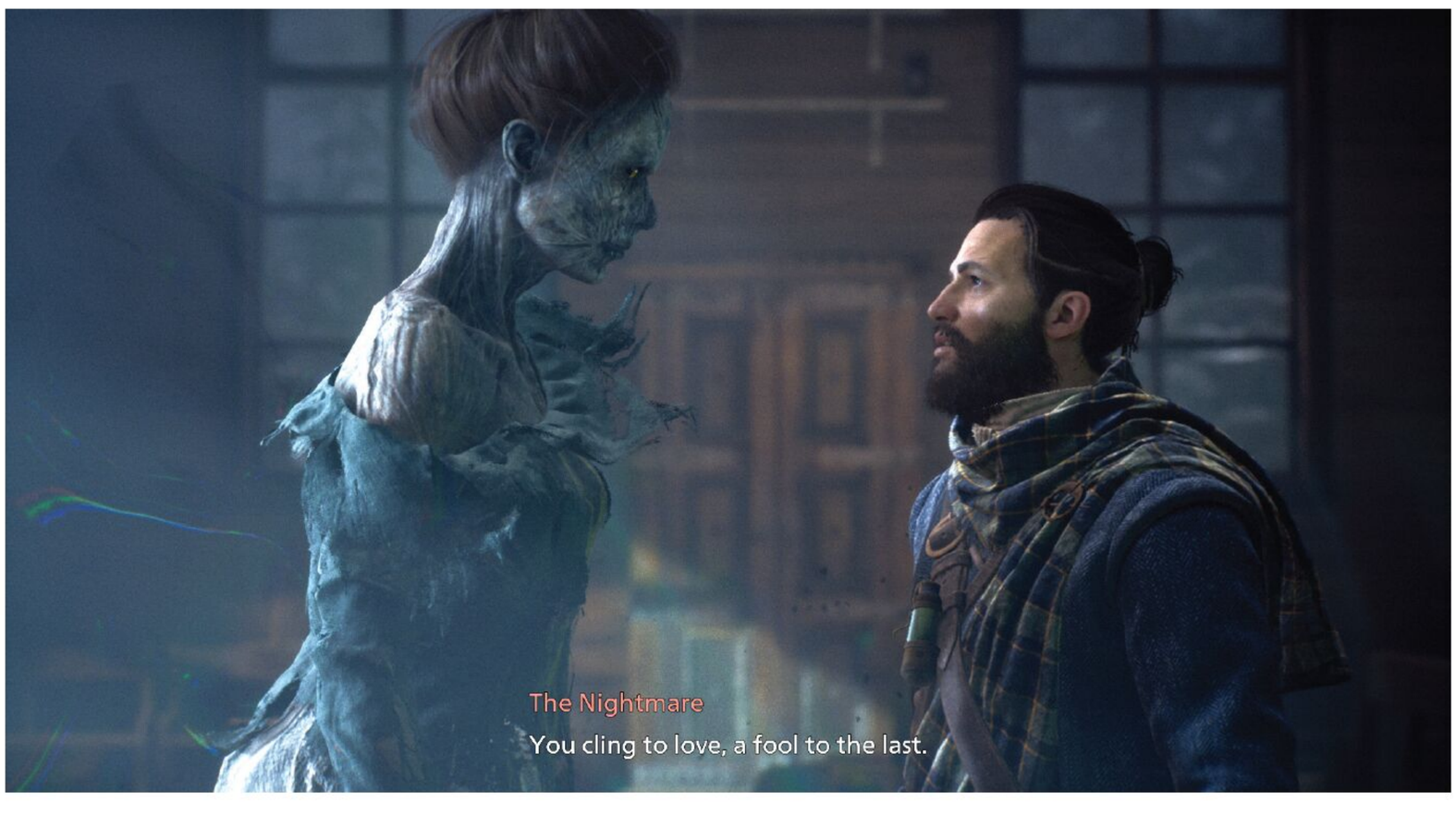
LINK
focus-entmt.com/en/games/banishers-ghosts-of-new-eden

Of course, in such a world, Antea's death hardly stops her making an appearance, and she soon returns as an active partner in Red's personal mission. While Red can touch things and talk to living people, Antea sees into the realm of the dead, where she can use her ghostly powers to destroy obstacles and unveil hidden items. You'll switch between them at the touch of a button, as you make use of their complimentary abilities to investigate hauntings and pummel ghosts into the afterlife.

LOVE IS...

While we often have party members in games like *Mass Effect*, there aren't many RPGs that feature two protagonists – and surely no others where they're in a relationship from the onset. It's refreshing to see the bickering, flirting and reminiscing of a mature couple, and to have that dynamic be present for the entire game.

I'm really quite fond of Antea and Red, now that I've seen their story through to one of the multiple endings, although for a long time they just felt too perfect to be relatable. It was only later on



RIGHT: The Nightmare (a very bad ghost) who's haunting the town.

TOP: Secrets abound, including these dangly things that house magic ingredients.

ABOVE: Antea can teleport short distances, handy in exploration and combat.

– when the easy back-and-forth that comprises their banter began to slip away, allowing deeper conversations to emerge – that I finally became attached to the couple.

I should note that I've only seen one of the two major endings teased at the start of the game: do you give Antea her ascent, and usher her into the afterlife, or use black magic to return her spirit to her body? Those aren't spoilers, by the way, but the major goals you spend the game working towards, as you either peacefully help New Eden's residents or (gulp) kill them to fuel Antea's return.

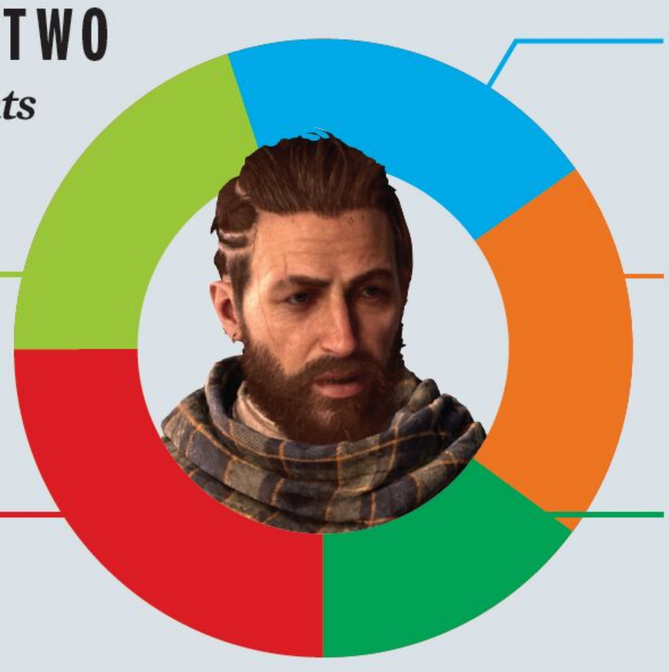
These are the decisions you'll have to make at the end of most main quests, and every side haunting, as you choose to murder the person haunted by a ghost, or leave 'em be, as you send the spook on their merry way. I was tempted to take the evil path, because the game seemed to be pushing me down it, while Antea's growth as a spirit makes much more sense in that context, but in the end I stubbornly played this as my usual saint. But whichever path you choose, the game recommends that you stick to it, as you'll need to murder a lot of settlers to power the resurrection spell, and if you flip-flop there might not be enough.

GHOST TOWN

Banishers' story has a very different flavour than most RPGs, in that

EDEN FOR TWO

The ingredients in Banishers' cauldron



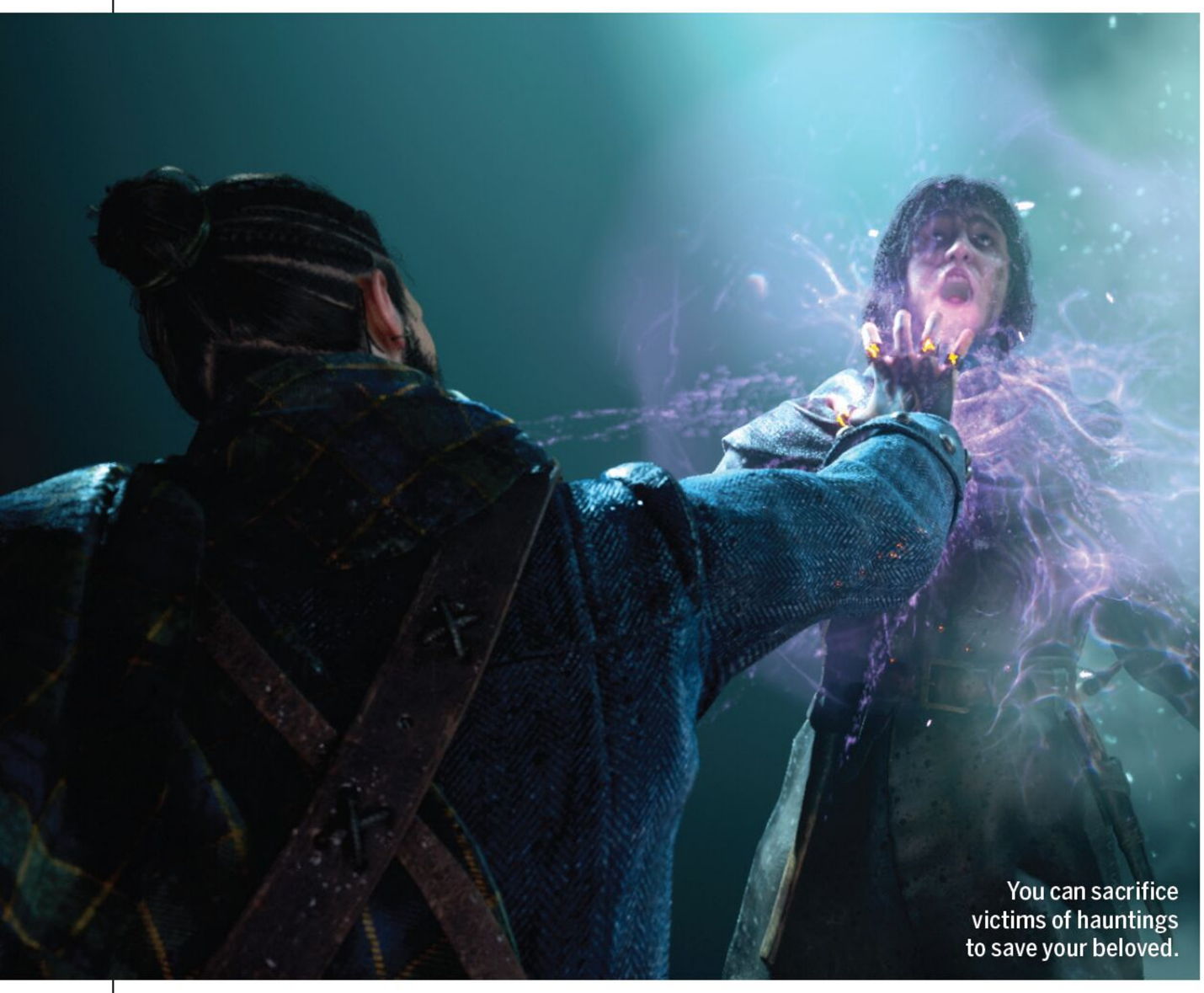
20% THE WITCHER 3
Quests are a similar mixture of investigation and combat.

20% THE CRUCIBLE
The story involves a witch hunt, and both are set at a similar time.

15% DARK SOULS
The combat is reminiscent, although there are difficulty options.

20% VAMPYR
Another Don't Nod game that gives you the choice to kill or save NPCs.

25% TOMB RAIDER
Both have Metroidvania-esque maps, and bonfires.


You can sacrifice victims of hauntings to save your beloved.

TOP: Your first attempt to defeat the Nightmare doesn't end well.

you're striving to save a region, a small cast of people, and your beloved rather than the entire world. I mean this as a compliment (well, mostly), but it feels like a *Witcher 3* quest blown up into a full-size game, really giving you the chance to get to know one town and its colourful inhabitants.

Despite the supernatural overtones, *Banishers* is very much set in our world, at a time when witch hunts (if not witches) were very real. A witch hunt is central to the plot, with most of the major characters involved in some way, so as you might imagine they're not an overly pleasant lot.

Every haunting drags up a shameful backstory, whether it's for the settlers or their hard-hearted leaders, and while it is difficult to like a bunch of murderous, mob-minded bigots, I did take pleasure in bringing their dark secrets into the light. Their nuanced facial animations convey emotion with subtlety, even if that emotion is usually hatred towards the meddling Banishers.

After the devastating prologue, in which Antea is killed and Red wakes up in the wilderness, New Eden's residents flee the town and hunker down in the nearby forest, the mountains, and a lovely stretch of farmland surprisingly untouched by the endless winter. All are still affected by the curse, however, with ghosts infesting the wilderness and

GHOSTED

Partners in ghostbusting, but also in love

ANTEA

Is dead
Puts a spanner in the works.

And hungry
Needs to ingest spiritual essence to survive.

Meet the boss
Was Red's mentor before her death.

Born in Cuba
Before an event in the past made her flee her home.

RED

Is not dead
Comes in handy for opening pickle jars.

A good egg
Can he bear to say goodbye to his lover?

Or a bad one
Or will he sacrifice his humanity to bring her back?

Born in Scotland
I could listen to his accent all day.

the more sentient ones still coming back to haunt their loved ones. Before you can even hope to return to the town proper, you'll have to hoof it to each of these areas and solve their problems.

WILD AT HEART

The world of *Banishers* is so large that you'll spend most of the game just traversing it, climbing up cliffs and squeezing through loading gaps, shimmying across ledges and balancing on fallen logs. I suppose it's an open world, in that it's all interconnected, but you can never simply run over an open plain from one side of the map to the other (and, lamentably, there are no horses to speed up the journey). Instead, navigation is a constant puzzle, with the game funnelling you down narrow and more open pathways every time you need to get anywhere (there is fast-travel, but you can only use it at infrequent bonfires).

I was strongly reminded of *Tomb Raider*, the 2013 reboot, which had a similar Metroidvania tinge to its world design. There are barriers you can return to later, once you've unlocked the relevant powers, and tons of hidden gear and crafting materials squirrelled about the place. It's not often I look at a map and think it doable, perhaps even enjoyable, to return after the ending in order to tidy up, but I might actually attempt that with *Banishers*.

It helps that it's a gorgeous, varied landscape, encompassing woodland, coastline, farmland, snowy hills and swampy bogs. A couple of things give me pause – all that tiring navigation, which creates a sense of constantly feeling lost – and the combat, which I never really clicked with.

SPIRITED DEFENCE

It's all a bit *Dark Souls*, but locked into subtle arenas as creatures emerge from the ether to interrupt your exploration. Using your sword and gun as Red, and your various spectral powers as Antea, you have to wallop spooky creatures that come in a variety of denominations, from lowly spectres to massive bosses made up of multiple unhappy spirits.

Ultimately combat is solid but not especially thrilling

I appreciate the subtle differences between the protagonists, with Antea not having a health bar but a rechargeable spirit gauge that whittles down as she attacks, and Red relying on, essentially, *Dark Souls*' Estus flasks. And hey, *Banishers* has bonfires too, which similarly recharge your healing items while respawning enemies – but as you can save at any time, and just restart from your last save when you die, their implementation does feel a little muddled.

Ultimately, combat is solid but not especially thrilling, soon falling into a comfortable rhythm of weakening enemies with Antea, before finishing them as Red, with not enough variation in your abilities or weapons to feel like you have much input over character development. I never came to hate the combat, but I would always groan when I discovered a large-ish space that would obviously house the next encounter, although they are usually brisk enough to not outstay their welcome.

There is a lot of combat, just as there's a lot of getting from A to B, in a story that sadly feels stretched thin. The ghost behind the curse is only really present in the prologue and climax of the game, while the rest has you slowly teasing out her backstory. Everyone here knows what happened, but I have to defeat this massive beast in the forest, and clear out this haunted mine, in exchange for mere narrative breadcrumbs? I feel that one proper interrogation – where we could put the obvious questions to the major players – would trim the game by a good ten hours or so.

But while there's tension between a more personal story and the expectations of scale that come with an RPG, I'm still glad I docked in New Eden Town. It's an evocative place, rich in atmosphere, history and horrible deeds, and it feels rewarding to drag its injustices into the light. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

***Banishers* is stretched thin, but with a world worth exploring and ghost stories well worth hearing.**

74

TOP: There are various categories of ghost, including whatever this is.

Much is hidden from the living, including clues and loot.

MIDNIGHT POWER

PERSONA 3: RELOAD is a big, beautiful revamp of the lengthy classic

By Heather Newman

P*ersona 3 Reload* isn't just a re-release or hi-res tune-up of the 2006 turn-based classic *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3*. It's a true remake, with nearly every aspect of the game other than the story changing in subtle or major ways. What feels like thousands of voiceover lines, impressive new persona animations, sharp graphic design and some nifty quality of life features give *Persona 3*'s solid story a high 2024 shine.

Sixteen years ago, *Persona 3* was a landmark release for RPGs. The way it combined a sim-style RPG about high school life with a dungeon crawler including both *Pokémon* androguelike elements gave it lots of depth.

Which is also a way to say that *Persona 3 Reload* is long. Really, really long. Enormously long. You're playing for a full year, one day at a time. Each day has multiple interactions and decision points. It typically takes more than 130 hours to meander your way through the game. I've enjoyed every hour I've spent in it.

It gives me choices with real consequences, and I love it

DAY AND NIGHT

You play as a transfer student, new to a town where people are afflicted by an apathy sickness that causes some to take their own lives. The culprit can be found in the Dark Hour, the secret time in the middle of the night when normal folks temporarily morph into coffins or get their souls melted. You and your friends, however, remain human during the Dark Hour and fight the shadows with the help of personas: alter-ego creatures and people you can summon to fight on your behalf.

In the daytime, you work on levelling up your attributes – studying raises your Academics score, for example, and singing karaoke alone boosts your Courage. Each activity lasts just long enough to reward your decisions; I never feel like I'm grinding pointless minigames.

You'll shop for the various items you need for dungeons in stores, in vending machines and via mail order, play online games, go out with friends or complete quests for them to strengthen your social links, which in turn strengthen persona types. There are dozens of ways to achieve the same goals, and each day is different.

The in-game calendar includes both the days and the phases of the moon, and many events and connections are specific to individual days of the week or months of the year. I couldn't just practice, and practice, and practice again on the track oval, because the team only meets a few times a week.

Return to an activity, and you'll find it different than when you left it, and decisions matter. If I choose to stay awake in class (to earn Academics points) instead of sleeping (to earn Courage), the five pop-quiz history questions I answer will show up on the midterm exam, rewarding my attentiveness. Having a bowl of ramen with a classmate might increase my social connection with him, and if I choose to go out with him again, his plans to ask a teacher out will have progressed, just as they would in real life. It gives me choices with real consequences, and I love it.

At night, the high school morphs into Tartarus, a giant tower of bad guys. Each section has a different architectural theme and shadows to fight as you ascend. The first section has multiple floors in a techy blue and black with a few shadows to fight in turn-based combat and chests to open on each floor. The second is a more organic-feeling, purple, curvy set of corridors that have giant faces set into the walls.

Your character has the unique ability to summon more than one persona and even combine them to create new ones, fusing a magician-cat-person Nekomata, or making that elven knight Tam Lin, for example. The combinations are wild, and if you don't cheat by reading online guides, unpredictable. It's great fun turning persona cards that look like monsters or priestesses into a Swiss maid, or a fractured combination of lion and eagle and scorpion.

A warning, if you've never played the series: personas are summoned when a teen hero puts what looks like a pistol to their head and fires. Suicide is a theme throughout, and this happens in every fight.

You can't climb the whole tower in one night. Make it too far and you will literally be blocked until the next full moon event. It's a ridiculously involved game, but my frustration in playing through it was never how long it took – it was not being able to do everything that I wanted to do, every day. That's a good thing.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A remake of the classic 2006 turn-based RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
$107.95

DEVELOPER
Atlus

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-10920X, 128GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
persona.atlus.com/p3r

PIXELS COUNT

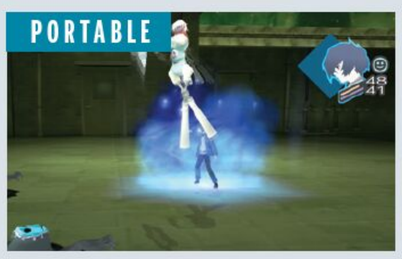
Persona 3 Portable vs Reload

SOCIAL

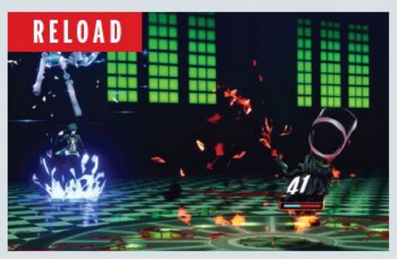
Conversations are two-dimensional, and scenes are empty backdrops.

Conversations are 3D, you're in the scene, and characters have full animation and voiceover.

COMBAT

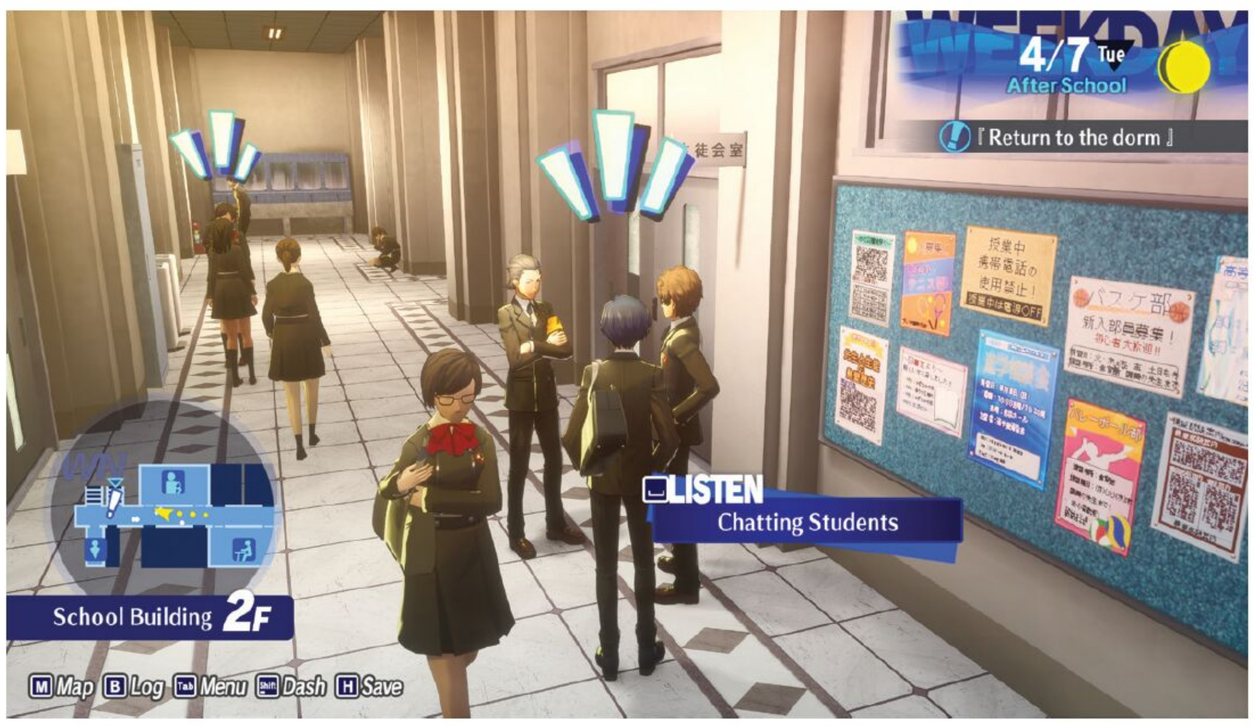


Shadow attacks and persona animations are simple, filling only some of the screen.



New animations showcase the personas, filling the screen with cool designs and effects.

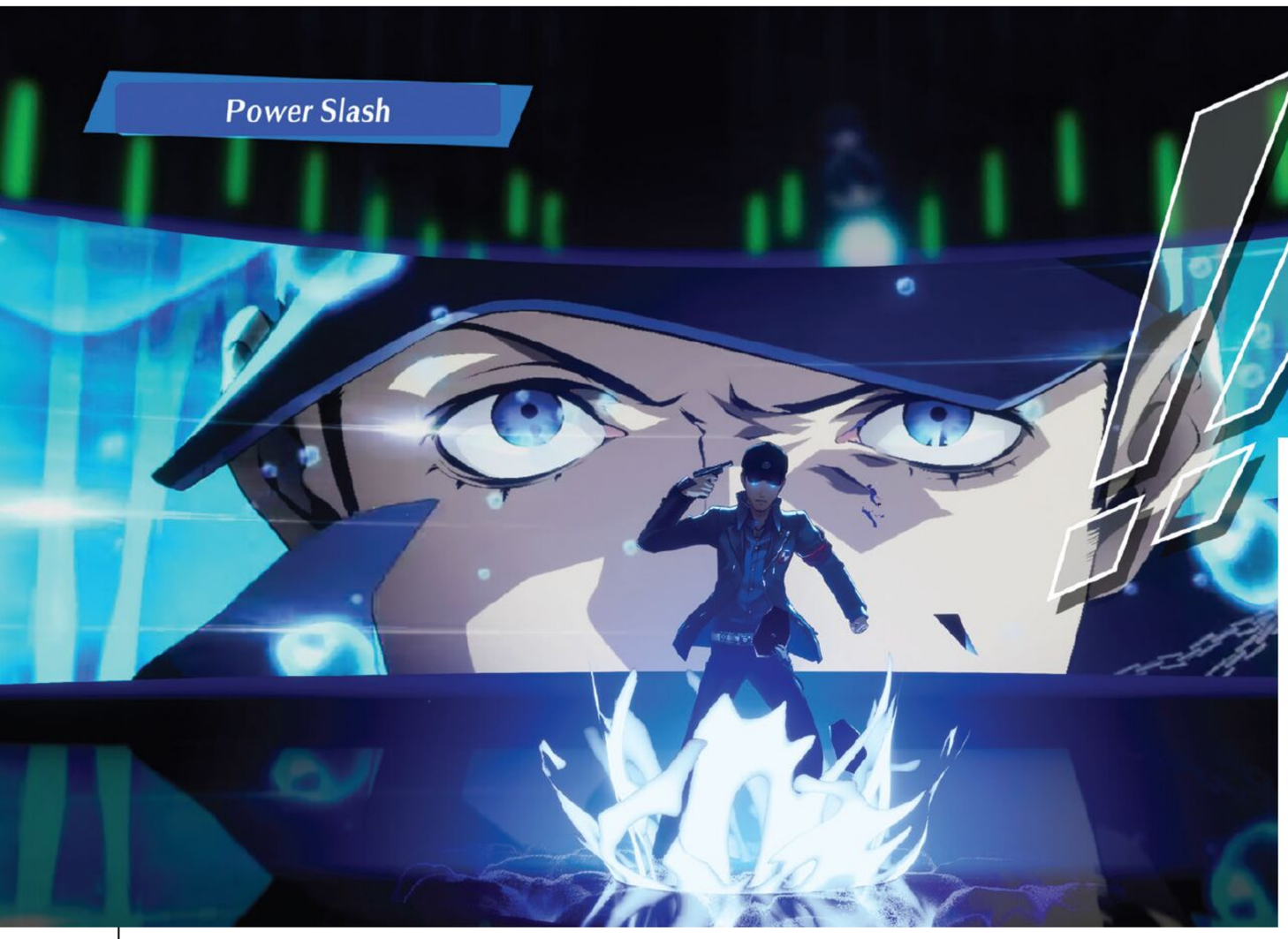
Persona shows off distinctly snappy graphic design in one combat ending screen.



FAR LEFT: Students will give you gossip and opportunities to try new activities.

LEFT: The Chairman supervises your dorm, and is always ready to stun with a pun.

Summoning a new persona is a dramatic affair.



RIGHT: Your group prepares to go dungeon diving.

BELOW: How well you pay attention in class can earn you points in Academics.

4/8 Wed
Afternoon
Ms. Toriumi
TALK
Open your textbooks and we'll take a look at the first novel by... Zenzou Kasai.
B Log Shift Auto Tab FF

NEW LOOK

Obviously the game has been dramatically upscaled from last year's *Persona 3 Portable* PC port, which was fairly faithful to the original *Persona 3* and its simple graphics. But *Reload* is not just the same game with more pixels: it's been rebuilt in the Unreal Engine, and it's gorgeous.

The characters are 3D, fully present in social settings and able to move freely about the areas, but the lighting and shading remain painterly enough to maintain *Persona*'s unique design style. In the strip mall monorail stop, you'll see shadows moving across escalator stairs. Outside the school, you'll talk with your friends while cherry blossoms fall and swirl all around you.

The artists have taken the sharp Persona look and built on it

In combat, it gets even better. The artists have taken the sharp *Persona* look and built on it, creating multi-panel graphic screens that evoke manga and mixing them beautifully with brand-new active animations for persona and enemy shadow abilities.

The way each persona emerges and fights – which changes from round to round, even when you're using the same abilities – is dramatic, screen-filling fun. Whether it's a valkyrie on horseback, a winged knight, a succubus in hotpants, or any of the other 173 combinations, each persona has its own style.

NEW SOUND

Much of *Persona 3*'s soundtrack has been remastered from scratch. The *Persona* composer departed Atlus in 2021, which may have contributed to that decision. While I liked these song vocals better than the originals, they're not as memorable as some other entries in the series (such as Gentle Madman from *Persona 5 Royal* is a favourite of mine).

Some of the most-haunting tunes play in the Velvet Room where you combine personas. They harken back to the original version of the game, with jazzy and mournful piano adding creepy ambiance.

What's better than the music is the voiceover audio. Every social link interaction has voiceover lines now, some of them extensive, in addition to the main plot. The voice acting is generally excellent.

Goofy Junpei, who could easily be 'that obnoxious JRPG guy' comes across as a surprisingly nuanced character, with insecurities and quirks, helped along by the skills of voice actor Zeno Robinson. If you don't want to listen to him, you can now use the Tab button functionality to toggle on super-speedy, automatic fast-forwarding through all interactions, but why would you when they're this fun?

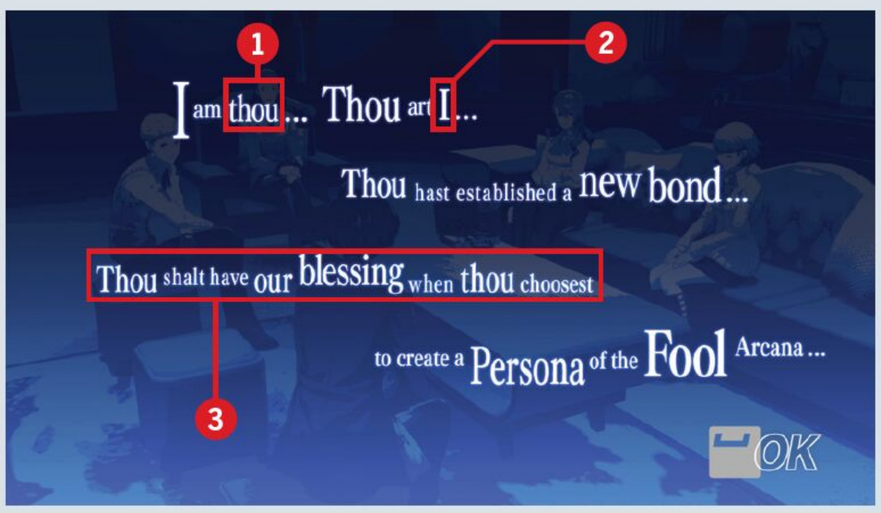
A VIEW QUIBBLES

UI improvements come thanks to the new game engine, since running up to things yourself is a much easier and more active way to interact than nudging a blue blob around on the screen as you did in the original. *Persona 3 Reload* flowed as smoothly as the Chairman's puns on my testing PC.

The controllable camera feels sluggish with a mouse and keyboard, however, requiring far too much mouse movement to see behind you. That's annoying when you have to shift directions in a dungeon, or when you need to use the right (and only the right) Ctrl button to attack. Unfortunately, controller players got the better end of the deal here; the PlayStation 5 version of the game has gorgeous camera control.

MEDIEVAL WORDCRAFT

Dear Atlus: here's how to use 'thou'


1
2
I am thou... Thou art I...
Thou hast established a new bond...
Thou shalt have our blessing when thou choosest
to create a Persona of the Fool Arcana...
3
OK

1 NO OBJECT
This exchange happens every time you make a new social bond. "Thou" is a subject, not an object. This should be either "I am thee," or in archaic English, "I am you".

2 SO CLOSE
"Thou art" is perfect. But again, "I" is not an object, even in medieval times. This should be "Thou art me". Yes, I know this exchange is a *Persona* tradition...

3 DEAD (HOUR) ON
...but the other 130 hours of the game sport nearly flawless English. This sentence nails "thou," plus two tough and different verb forms.

In combat, I really enjoyed the individual control of party members, particularly in combination with the One More mechanic. When you knock an enemy down (with, say, a persona attack that it is weak to), you have the option to strike again. You can choose to pass that turn to someone else in the party.

It's super fun to chain from a character that has a single-target strong electric attack to someone whose persona can then cast that type of move on the entire group of enemies, for example.

MODERN VALUES

Persona 3 Reload has made a few minor nods to contemporary sensibilities. A warning screen at the start of the game lets you know that you'll be seeing scenes of violence, bullying and self-harm. There is a minor in-passing question about why the evoker that is used to summon personas 'has to look like a gun'.

Very little else in the game's story has changed, which isn't for the better in all cases. Athletic club manager Yuko (she manages whatever team you join) carries on about having to pick up after her male charges and comments that at least it keeps her from gaining weight, and women not on the combat team are frequently portrayed as doe-eyed man-chasers or caregivers. Sometimes the core characters fall prey to sexist tropes.

But my biggest single complaint with *Persona 3 Reload* is one major missing feature from *Persona 3 Portable*: it is no longer possible to choose to play through as a female lead character. That's a shame, not just because you can't play as a girl, but also because the option gave *Portable* some serious replayability.

But in a game this huge and this rewarding, I'll let it slide. *Persona 3 Reload* is fabulous, engrossing, and ridiculously deep. If you've never played a *Persona*, this is a great introduction to the series, and holds its own against the newer games. If you've played it before, you're going to be shocked at how very reloaded the experience feels. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Persona 3 Reload is a highly-polished remake of the 2006 classic. However, a few elements haven't aged well.

89

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes

The stage is made up of floating islands. Scout out the strawberries, then go exploring.

PEAK PRACTICE

A modern platforming classic embraces 3D in CELESTE 64

What a joy it is to be back in *Celeste*'s world, with its distinctive colour palette and chiptunes to warm your bones on its snow-covered mountain. *Celeste 64* isn't a sequel, but a small game made in celebration of its sixth anniversary. Collect strawberries in an intricate platforming level, while suffering a heroic number of deaths. Same as it ever was, but with one key difference: it's now in 3D.

It's an alarming shift from the previous game, which is one of the most exquisite and precise 2D platformers yet made. When you failed to pass *Celeste*'s devious platforming challenges, you could only blame yourself. Likewise, when you succeeded, it was all down to you. It felt so good to jump and dash across its two-dimensional planes that the thought of bunging in one more dimension feels like heresy.

It's something worth exploring though, and why not experiment with a little, free game? So here's what *Celeste* looks like in three dimensions, in a one-level game whipped up in just a week.

I haven't played *Celeste* in ages, but it was barely any time before I was air-dashing and wall-climbing with the best of them. OK, not quite with the best of them – I'm far from a pro at precision-platformers – but Madeline's physics and move-set are comfortably familiar to her previous game. The major difference is that she can now hang onto walls indefinitely, taking the pressure off as you clamber round the 3D structures.

Madeline's physics and move set are comfortably familiar

One of the main benefits of a 3D world is all the new hiding places for collectibles, and the developer has found plenty of clever alcoves in which to stash those elusive strawberries. The exploration element is heightened in general, as you tilt the camera up to survey distant platforms and wonder 'how am I going to get up there?' The level isn't enormous, but large enough to last for multiple hours, depending on adept you are at clearing its platforming gauntlets.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 3D platformer that takes you back to *Celeste*'s snowy mountain

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Maddy Makes Games

PUBLISHER
Maddy Makes Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/Celeste64

INTO THE VOID

I did struggle at times, and for a reason common to many 3D platformers: depth perception. It can be difficult to judge the distance between platforms, even with the optional visual guide you can activate from the menu. I overcame this issue, when I could, by tilting the camera way up over Madeline's head, essentially turning a 3D platformer into a top-down one.

I don't know if I'm dying more here than in the original *Celeste*, but when I do I'm often swearing at the game, rather than myself. *Celeste 64* might be less precise than its predecessor, then – but for a free game whipped up in a week, I think we can lower the pitchforks. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

While it hasn't quite nailed 3D platforming, this still largely looks, feels and plays like the excellent *Celeste*.

76

BELOW: The gun has to be loaded, and unloaded, manually.

SHOE-IN

These boots are made for walking in NEURAL PARASITE

Before WASD and mouse-aiming became the norm, there were all sorts of crazy control schemes for first-person games, and in that light *Neural Parasite*'s isn't too bizarre. You move with your feet – by which I mean you click on a pair of on-screen feet, alternately, to make your character walk.

So that's left click to step forwards, or right click to step backwards, clicking the left shoe then the right, well, you get the idea. To turn around, you click the arrows at the edges of the screen – it's as if keyboards were never invented. I'm struggling to imagine a worse control scheme for a first-person shooter.

Luckily, *Neural Parasite* isn't an FPS. It's a first-person survival horror, a genre where control awkwardness isn't just expected, it's almost celebrated. When *Resident Evil* ditched its tank controls, a lot of the combat tension dissipated, as you could now literally run rings round the enemy. *Neural Parasite* goes the other way, presenting a control scheme so cumbersome that, at first, it seems an elaborate joke.

Waking up in a Nazi facility, you have to scour the gloomy halls for keys, knives and, ultimately, pistol ammo, as shuffling zombies emerge to have a munch on you. There'd be little tension if you could simply hold S to step backwards, but here you're frantically clicking the shoe icons – oh shit, I left-clicked when I meant to right-click. Great, that's me eaten.

The shooting is brilliantly tactile too, as you have to push out used bullets before you can insert fresh ones, then aim at the enemy's wobbling head in the dark. ■

75

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Jonathan Fasth	bit.ly/NeuralGame

SLUDGE LIFE

Less waste, more speed in platformer TOXIC TOMB

No one puts as much effort into a game's presentation as Locomalito, developer of sidescrolling shmup *Super Hydorah*, and other games with a distinctly arcade sensibility. These are new games that look like retro re-releases, complete with hi-res screen borders, CRT filters and even box art to print out at home.

That's not to say the attention to detail is lacking in-game, as these feel like games that could have been unearthed from a '90s time capsule. *Toxic Tomb* resembles a Master System game, with its looping, one-room stages and simple premise.

You play as a demon trying to save a power plant, by killing the ghouls that have set up shop in its reactors – er, forget what I just said about that simple premise. But it's just an excuse to fill stages with toxic blobs and generators – destroy all these and the stage's boss ghoul will be unleashed.

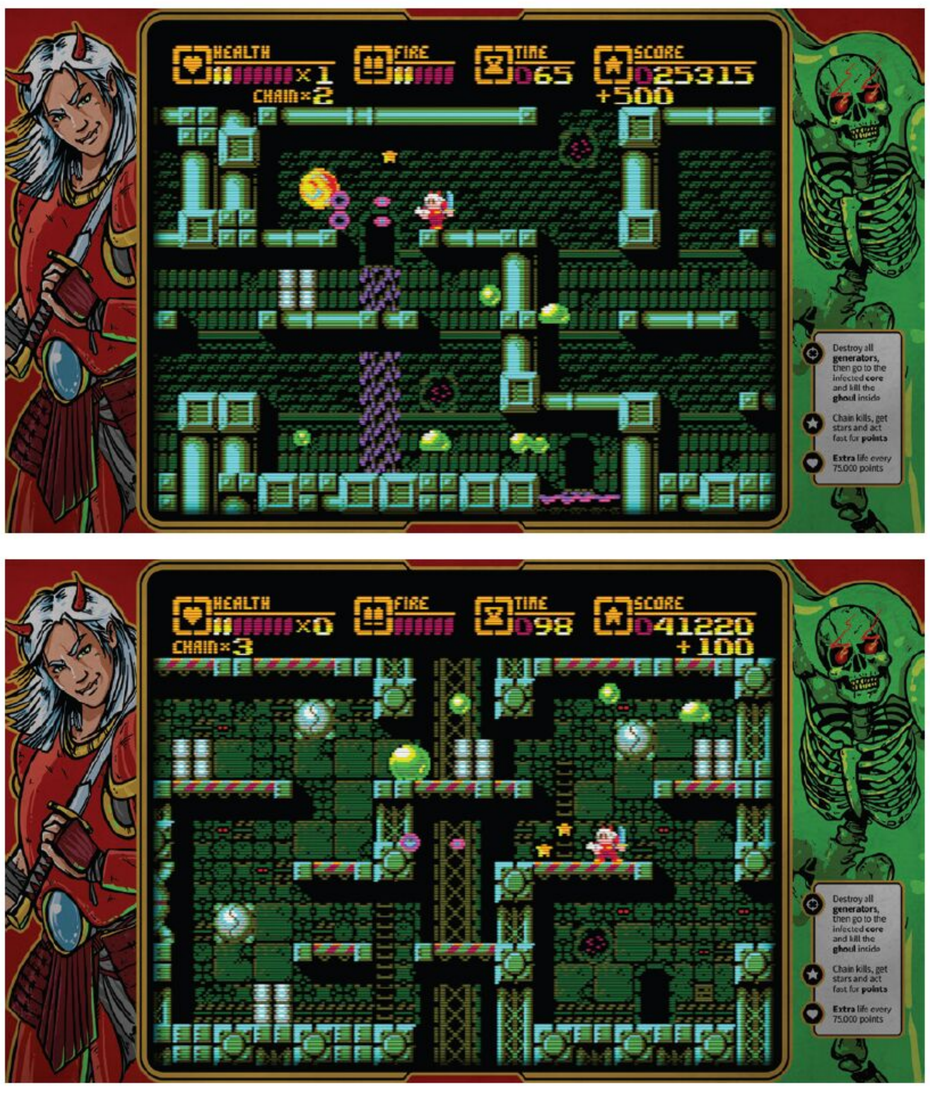
It's a hard game, with no difficulty concessions on that lavish game menu, but you can always dodge the spawning blobs if you're quick enough. Really you want to make a beeline for them, as chaining kills and star collectibles is the way to earn mega-points and extra lives.

It's an old-school sensibility, thankfully in a game with a modern obsession with precision. Moving, jumping and shooting feels snappy and responsive. My favourite touch is the automatic sword slash when you attack an enemy at close-range.

This sort of score-chasing platformer isn't my favourite, admittedly, but *Toxic Tomb* compares favourably with similar games like *Bubble Bobble* and the original *Mario Bros.* ■

78

BELOW: Want more points? Let the spawning blobs mass and harvest them.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Locomalito	bit.ly/ToxicTomb

GROUP TEST

RTX 40-SERIES SUPER GPUs

Here's how super-duper variants of Ada Lovelace graphics cards stack up.

By Jacob Ridley

Group Test

Three new graphics cards in the same month – what a super way to kick off spring. These three new 'Super' graphics cards are a chance for the green team to tinker with core counts, buses and budgets to appeal to our PC gaming sensibilities, and I'm pleased to say this lot are a lot more appealing than the last.

Each Super graphics card carries more cores than the non-Super variant of the same name, and that's about the extent of the improvements for the RTX 4070 Super. However, the RTX 4070 Ti Super comes with an entirely different GPU to the RTX 4070 Ti.

RTX 4080

NVIDIA **$1,799**

Much maligned

1 The RTX 4080 was launched in November, 2022 and for most of the time since I, and many others, have been hoping for a price drop. Discounts have been few and far between, however, with often a four-digit sum required to take one of these chunky cards home. Now, if by some stroke of luck you were able to buy this card for less than the regular asking price, you'd receive something particularly powerful. On paper, the RTX 4080 is closely matched to the RTX 3080 Ti from last generation. However, if you pit one against the other in gaming benchmarks, there's only one winner. The RTX 4080 is absolutely dominant. So, what's the big issue? That would be the card's positioning. Nvidia has asked a high fee for this card and the absolute daddy of graphics cards, the RTX 4090, was tantalisingly within reach. There's no comparison between the RTX 4080 and RTX 4090 – the latter is in a league of its own. When spending upwards of four figures on a graphics card, it's the RTX 4090 that everyone wants. As a result, the RTX 4080 often felt most in need of a rebalance.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Overpriced
- Huge
- Solid at 4K

SPECS CUDA CORES: 9,728 / **MEMORY:** 16GB GDDR6X / **BUS:** 256-BIT / **TGP:** 320W / **GPU:** AD103

RTX 4080 Super

NVIDIA **$1,999**

More for less

2 The RTX 4080 Super addresses our key concerns with the RTX 4080. The high price has been rectified, replaced by a new ~$2,000 tag. There's more GPU for the money, too, with the Super version delivering the full AD103 GPU with higher core counts across CUDA, Tensor, and RT cores. There has also been a minor tweak to the memory speed, from 22.4Gbps to 23Gbps. These changes to the GPU and memory make little difference to the overall performance of this card. The RTX 4080 Super would occasionally lead the RTX 4080 in benchmarking by a handful of frames, though other times would simply match it. I don't mind that, however, thanks to the price cut. The RTX 4080 Super does feel like a tacit admission by Nvidia that it may have over-reached on the pricing of the original RTX 4080. To launch a new version of the same card for $200 less doesn't scream confidence in the card's ability to sell-through stock. Similarly it's the only Super card to launch cheaper than the existing non-Super card.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Price drop
- Still huge
- RTX 4080 performance

SPECS CUDA CORES: 10,240 / **MEMORY:** 16GB GDDR6X / **BUS:** 256-BIT / **TGP:** 320W / **GPU:** AD103

2

THERE HAS BEEN A MINOR TWEAK TO THE MEMORY SPEED

3

THE CARD'S SLIM MEMORY BUS AND CAPACITY ARE TOUGH SELLS

RTX 4070 Ti

NVIDIA **$1,200**

Memory troubles

3 The RTX 4070 Ti appeared headed for disaster at one point – it was originally announced as the RTX 4080 12GB with an $1,659 price tag. Nvidia saw sense ahead of the card's release, however, and 'unlaunched' it. The company then reformulated that card into the RTX 4070 Ti before us today. During our runs we saw the RTX 4070 Ti often trouncing the RTX 3090, which is no easy feat, and as such it became a natural fit for any 4K gaming PC with a reasonable budget. With upscaling and frame generation technologies in tow it can make an impact even with every graphical preset cranked up to 11, too. However, the card's slim memory bus and capacity are tough sells. The RTX 4070 Ti struggles even more pitted against the new and improved RTX 4070 Super. With a much lower price tag and performance that's often within 10% of the Ti, you're better off ignoring the older card and searching out the Super instead. That shouldn't pose any sort of problem – the RTX 4070 Ti won't be around for long as it's been replaced by the RTX 4070 Ti Super.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → **Weak memory**
- → **Too expensive**
- → **Great 4K performance**

SPECS CUDA CORES: 7,680 / **MEMORY:** 12GB GDDR6X / **BUS:** 192-BIT / **TGP:** 285W / **GPU:** AD104

RTX 4070 Ti Super

NVIDIA **$1,400**

Problem solved

4 With an entirely different GPU stuffed inside it, the RTX 4070 Ti is a big departure from the card it replaces. Where the RTX 4070 Ti uses a bigger version of the RTX 4070 chip, the Super uses a cut-down RTX 4080 GPU, and that affords it a few more luxuries the standard Ti could only dream of. The main improvement with the Super being the larger memory bus it offers at 256-bit. This is host to 16GB of GDDR6X memory – a whole 4GB more than you'll find on the standard Ti. The overall benefit of this improvement is felt more in some games, less in others. It depends how much memory matters for that specific game. Of course, 4K tends to use more memory, and the Super should and often does come out on top at this resolution most of all. The Super is not as pronounced a step up over its predecessor as you might expect, however. That's likely down to the similarities in core counts across the two cards. The Super comes with 768 CUDA cores more than the non-Super, spread across six extra SMs. A slim upgrade, really.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

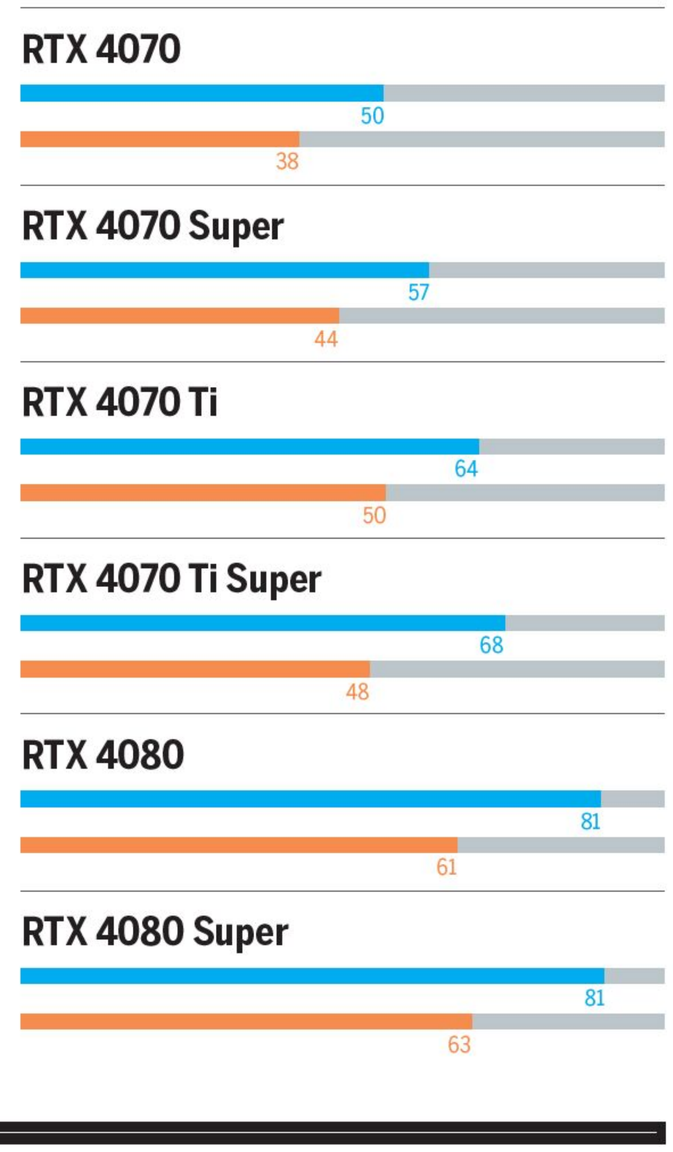
- → **Proper memory system**
- → **Slim core upgrade**
- → **Good efficiency**

SPECS CUDA CORES: 8,448 / **MEMORY:** 16GB GDDR6X / **BUS:** 256-BIT / **TGP:** 285W / **GPU:** AD103

BENCHMARKS

Metro Exodus Enhanced Edition
DX12, Ultra, 4K

Average Minimum (fps – higher is better)



RTX 4070

NVIDIA **$900**

Price drop

5 You're looking at a more affordable graphics card in the RTX 4070, at least compared to the other cards included in this test. It's come down in price further since the release of the RTX 4070 Super, but we'll get onto that card shortly. For now, let's focus on whether the RTX 4070 is worth picking up, as this card continues to be made alongside the Super.

We've described the RTX 4070 as "an RTX 3080 with benefits" and that's still true today. It's generally faster, has access to more memory, and is massively more power efficient. Using newer manufacturing technologies through all of the RTX 40-series, Nvidia has managed to stuff a lot more transistors into a tiny, more efficient GPU. The RTX 4070 is prime example of that process.

The difficulty for Nvidia hit once AMD released the RX 7800 XT. This card offered mostly similar performance in rasterised games, a little less in ray-traced ones, but for a significant saving. The recent price drop from Nvidia helps keep this card in the game and competitive with AMD's options.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Solid performance
- Cool
- Quiet

SPECS CUDA CORES: 5,888 / **MEMORY:** 12GB GDDR6X / **BUS:** 192-BIT / **TGP:** 200W / **GPU:** AD104

RTX 4070 Super

NVIDIA **$1,100**

Best of the bunch

6 The RTX 4070 Super is an all-round improvement on the RTX 4070. It delivers much the same power-savvy performance as its namesake for the same price asked for it at launch. That sort of mid-generation improvement makes it an easy recommendation to make for most PC gamers.

The RTX 4070 Super comes with a heap more cores than the standard model – 7,168 to 5,888 – but sticks with the same memory configuration at 12GB of GDDR6X. What's important to note is that this core bump puts the Super card pretty close to the outgoing RTX 4070 Ti. The Ti had extended a comfy lead over the original RTX 4070 with its 7,680 CUDA cores but that lead has shrunk significantly between it and the Super.

The RTX 4070 Super is arguably the best of the Super bunch. It's the sort of more-for-your-money card we'd hoped to see out of a mid-generation Ada Lovelace refresh. This will be the card to look out for in the coming months, though I wouldn't pass up an original RTX 4070 for under $800.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Good value
- Decent core bump
- Efficient

SPECS CUDA CORES: 7,168 / **MEMORY:** 12GB GDDR6X / **BUS:** 192-BIT / **TGP:** 220W / **GPU:** AD104

TECH REPORT

The future of graphics processing probably lies offline, in data centres.

GOING DEEPER

DLSS is getting smarter – what does that mean for local computational power?

It's been around for long enough now that we take it for granted. A new game comes out, dripping in graphics, and occasionally when we run it at 4K it dips to an unplayable 58fps. So we go into the video options, turn the 'DLSS' option on, and get back on with walking through neon-lit streets in our game du jour.

But DLSS is worth paying closer attention to. This tech is indistinguishable from magic. It's upscaling our games in real time, at the point that the frame is being rendered by the GPU. It's able not just to take a 1080p image and produce a very convincing 4K version that doesn't eat up resources, but also to interpolate between rendered frames for a smoother visual experience and a higher overall framerate. Without it, developers wouldn't be able to push ray tracing as far, or Unreal Engine 5's impressive features like Nanite and Lumen. And its pace of evolution is fearsome.

Since its earliest implementations in *Battlefield V* and *Metro Exodus* in 2019 as DLSS 1.0, it's had quite the glow up. The benefits weren't that obvious then – it had to be trained per game, loading up countless frames in a supercomputer and learning what each frame should look like at a higher resolution. The results had artefacts in them and the performance boost was modest. There was no control over how much DLSS you were applying, just an on/off toggle.

DLSS unofficially updated to a 1.9 release a few months later in August 2019, and by the time Remedy's utterly superlative *Control* came out (go and play *Control* immediately) it had been adapted to make use of the CUDA cores on Geforce RTX 2000 architecture instead of just the dedicated Tensor cores which take information from the Nvidia deep-learning supercomputer and interpret it.

DLSS 2.0 followed in April 2020, and this time the big progress was a form of TAAU that had been trained generically rather than per-game. In other words, DLSS 2.0 knew how to smooth out any and all jaggies in any image. It didn't need the supercomputer to study a specific game over trillions of frames first. What it meant for us on ground level was fewer artefacts, noticeably better fidelity and more granularity over how we applied it in our games.

LEFT OUT IN THE COLD

In 2022 we saw version 3.0, and a year after we were treated to 3.5. With the not insignificant caveat that older RTX cards were left out in the cold and only the insanely pricy RTX 4000 boards received the new goodies, this is where DLSS started to get properly exciting. Also a bit spooky. It wasn't just upscaling frames any more, or doing anti-aliasing grunt work, but generating extra frames, seemingly for free, without anything like the same hit to fidelity that previous versions created. DLSS 3.0 introduced optical flow interpolation, a

Red alert

What's AMD's response to all this? In a characteristic mode from team red, they released an open-source, GPU-agnostic alternative to DLSS called FidelityFX Super Resolution, part of a wider open-source suite called GPUOpen. How does it stack up against its great rival? Pretty favourably, actually. It won a lot of good will by making itself available to both Nvidia and AMD users, and while the image quality of upscaled frames is perhaps slightly less sharp in most games than Nvidia's offering, it's close.

WHERE WERE YOU? *Four games from yesteryear that needed DLSS*

CRYSIS
Imagine pressing a button in the graphics options and watching your framerate double. We'd have been able to play it.

BOILING POINT
The thing is, it wasn't that bad. The pioneering shooter might actually have been playable, with AI's help.

GEOFF CRAMMOND'S GRAND PRIX 3
Trying to gain the upper hand over messrs Schumacher, Hakkinenn and Villeneuve at 10fps was not easy.

METRO 2033
2010's finest barely playable tech demo. The shooting was really meaty too, not that you could ever enjoy it at the time.

technique that takes two rendered frames from the pipeline, interpolates the differences between them, then renders more frames in the middle. That's how it's able to send your FPS skyrocketing like a dodgy cryptocurrency.

Version 3.5's advances target ray tracing, and uses five times more training data than DLSS 3.0 to achieve a denoising effect on ray-traced images via ray reconstruction. It's a significant cog in the engine of algorithms that makes path-tracing possible in *Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty*. And when you look at the forgettable effect it had on the way *Battlefield V* looked and place that next to *Phantom Liberty* five years later, you see what a big deal DLSS has been. For Nvidia, for the game industry, and for everyone with an Nvidia GPU.

Because during a five-year period characterised by semiconductor shortages, poor die yields and a constant struggle to achieve more computational power through die shrinks, it's been this largely offline, deep learning AI-based process where we've seen the great leaps forwards.

It's a bit trite to say that AI's the future at this point. AI was the future in 2021. Today, we're already bored of hearing about all the ways it's changing every molecule of our familiar lives. With that said – the fact that DLSS has achieved what it has paints a curious picture of the future for PC graphics. What's the point of buying these expensive slabs of silicon if they're increasingly going to be used simply to interpret the work a supercomputer did somewhere in a data centre?

And AI already has the answer to this: it's designing the next generations of graphics cards. Nvidia's chief scientist and senior vice president of research Bill Dally explained in 2022 that the company is using AI to optimise new RTX cards, including streamlining processes and improving energy efficiency. So AI's building better cards that will use AI to render stuff for you.

AI'S BUILDING BETTER CARDS THAT WILL USE AI TO RENDER STUFF FOR YOU

Ultimately software can't replace hardware. However smart the deep learning supercomputers are, we'll need something that deciphers the huge amount of information they provide. That's why DLSS isn't a system-wide technique.

So AI won't replace graphics cards. But it's already changed how they're designed, and what their purpose actually is. No longer an engine room of local rendering, modern GPUs are part of a pipeline that relies increasingly in offline rendering work, to deliver eerily detailed frames to our monitors at speeds that simply haven't been possible by local rendering. Now if only it could draw hands properly... ■

Phil Iwaniuk

TOP LEFT: Nvidia's migrated anti-aliasing to AI too, as of DLSS 2.0.

TOP: The supercomputers where DLSS is trained. Secret agents hiding nearby, presumably.

AUSTRALIAN PC AWARDS 2024

And the winners are...

Behold: the PC gear from the last year that we reckon is better than all the rest!

The time has come for the big reveal – as we announce the 2024 winners across all categories of the Australian PC Awards!

After exhaustive testing, comparisons, benchmarking and taking into account value, innovation, quality and features, we have our winners. Everything important that goes inside a PC, connects to a PC, or is important to the PC has been rated by the team of experts at *PC PowerPlay*, with help from our colleagues at *APC*, *TechRadar* and *PC Gamer*.

If you're looking for an upgrade – this is the list you want. And if you're planning a complete new rig, well you can't go wrong with choosing the gear here. Maybe you already run something we've awarded, in which case you are 100% entitled to feel chuffed about your wise purchase.

The team here extends a big congratulations to all the winners, highly commendeds and finalists. If it's on a list here, it's good gear!

What are the Australian PC Awards?

Our awards cover all the main categories that affect the PC, encompassing products that went onsale in Australia during 2023, as well as our special awards:

Excellence Award: Presented to the person, product or technology that advanced the PC more than any other in 2023.

Gold Award: For the best overall company operating in the PC space for 2023. This list includes every one of the finalists across all the other categories – and has been carefully considered by our expert panel of judges.

And of course there must be balance with all things, which leads us to this year's **Epic Fail Award**. May the most dismal failure win!

And the winners are...

MOTHERBOARDS

In the absence of a major new platform or socket release, 2023 was a relatively quiet year for new motherboard releases. But that doesn't mean there weren't any new models.

The highlight of 2023 was the release of a wave of refreshed Z790 motherboards. They accompanied Intel's 14th Generation CPU range and they introduced a few new, and welcome features. They'll end up being the best and last LGA 1700 motherboards to be released before Intel switches to the LGA 1851 socket in late 2023 or early 2024. The headline new feature was the introduction of support for Wi-Fi 7, the next generation networking standard. Of course, they have out of the box support for 14th Generation processors, along with generally beefed up power delivery systems, improved USB capabilities and support for much faster DDR5 memory. Some Z790 refresh boards even unofficially support DDR5-8000 and higher.

Things were relatively quiet on the AMD front, with the entry level A620 chipset being the only new chipset to be released, and it was a quiet launch at that. A620 motherboards are best paired with AMD's 65W-class processors and entry level builds. Most of the B650 and X670 motherboards on the market during 2023 were released in 2022. Not that they're 'old'. A good AM5 motherboard will remain relevant for years to come.

MOTHERBOARD MAKER

ASROCK

Asrock doesn't promote itself to the extent Gigabyte, MSI and particularly Asus do, but saving millions of dollars on marketing means it can offer high quality and feature rich motherboards at more affordable prices. What's not to like about that?

FINALISTS: Asus, Asrock, MSI, Gigabyte Aorus.

PREMIUM MOTHERBOARD

ASROCK Z790 TAICHI LITE

A bold release from Asrock that drops the premium aesthetic of the regular Z790 Taichi while retaining all of its features, saving a lot of money in the process. Hopefully it won't be the last motherboard to adopt such an approach.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Asus ROG Maximus Z790 Dark Hero

FINALISTS: Asrock Z790 Taichi Lite, MSI Z790I Edge Wi-Fi Mini-ITX, Gigabyte Z790 Aorus Master X, Asus ROG Maximus Z790 Dark Hero, Asrock Z790 Nova Wi-Fi.

VALUE MOTHERBOARD

MSI MAG B760M MORTAR MAX WIFI

A classy all round and feature rich motherboard that makes some more expensive boards look overpriced. Alongside its lovely looks and strong VRM, it's one of very few motherboards that can overclock locked 12th Gen processors.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Asrock Z790 Riptide WiFi

FINALISTS: Asus TUF Gaming B650 Plus WIFI, MSI MAG B760M Mortar Max WiFi, MSI MAG Z790 Tomahawk Max WiFi, Asrock Z790 Riptide WiFi, Asus TUF Gaming Z790-Pro WiFi, Asrock B760M PG Sonic WiFi, Asus ROG Strix B760-F Gaming WiFi.

GRAPHICS CARDS

After a tumultuous period during the pandemic and the sudden collapse of demand from miners, the graphics card market is still somewhat struggling for a return to normalcy. Prices remain elevated and it doesn't help that there's a new and extremely lucrative drag on optimal supply. Of course, we're talking about AI. High end cards remain overpriced. Just a few years back, spending $1,000 would have gotten you a flagship card, but now that kind of money will only get you an upper mid-range card. With console supply stabilising in 2023, it's understandably tough for PC gamers to justify spending the really big bucks on high end cards, especially given ongoing cost of living pressures.

Things aren't that rosier at the more affordable end of the market. Capable options like the RTX 4060 and RX 7600 are essentially entry level GPUs at mid-range prices. Sure, you have good technologies such as DLSS 3, FSR3 and frame generation, but native performance still matters, and spending $500 to $600 on a graphics card from Nvidia or AMD should deliver a little bit more both in terms of base specifications and performance.

Of course, we can't forget Intel either. Though they got off to a rocky start, Intel's Arc cards have come a long way and are definitely worth considering at the budget end of the market after many welcome driver updates.

GRAPHICS CARD MAKER

MSI

Once again, MSI's graphics cards impress with an excellent balance of performance, efficient cooling at low noise levels and aesthetics. And they're very competitive at all price points.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Powercolour

FINALISTS: Asus, MSI, Gigabyte Aorus, Asrock, Sapphire, Zotac, Powercolour.

VALUE GRAPHICS CARD

MSI GEFORCE RTX 4060 VENTUS BLACK 2X

In a tough year for budget gaming, MSI's RTX 4060 Ventus is an affordable option that offers decent performance for the money, especially when Nvidia's DLSS 3 and Frame Generation technologies are factored in.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Sapphire Nitro+ Radeon RX 7800 XT

FINALISTS: MSI GeForce RTX 4070 Gaming X Trio, MSI GeForce RTX 4060 Ventus Black 2X, Asus Dual RTX 4060 Ti OC Edition, PowerColor Radeon RX 7600 Fighter, Sapphire Nitro+ Radeon RX 7800 XT.

PREMIUM GRAPHICS CARD

GIGABYTE RTX 4070 TI GAMING OC

Gigabyte's RTX 4070 Ti Gaming takes out the top gong thanks to its combination high performance, excellent efficiency and value for money. If spending the really big bucks turns you off. Look right here.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Asus ROG Strix GeForce RTX 4090 OC EVA-02 Edition

FINALISTS: Gigabyte RTX 4070 Ti Gaming OC, Asus ROG Strix GeForce RTX 4090 OC EVA-02 Edition, MSI GeForce RTX 4070 Ti Gaming X Trio, Zotac Gaming GeForce RTX 4070 Ti Twin Edge OC Spider-Man, Sapphire Pulse Radeon RX 7900 XT.

And the winners are...

VALUE CPU
AMD RYZEN 5 7500F

AMD's entry level Zen 4 CPU punches well above its weight, offering class leading performance and power efficiency at a price that makes it very hard to justify spending more on a six-core CPU.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Intel Core i5-13400
FINALISTS: Intel Core i5-13400, AMD Ryzen 5 5600X3D, Intel Core i5-13100F, AMD Ryzen 5 7500F.

MID-RANGE CPU
AMD RYZEN 7 7800X3D

If you're a gamer first and foremost, this is the chip to buy. Games tend to thrive thanks to its voluminous cache, while its low power consumption embarrasses its competitors.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Intel Core i5-14600K
FINALISTS: AMD Ryzen 5 7600, Intel Core i7-14700K, Intel Core i5-14600K, AMD Ryzen 7 7800X3D, AMD Ryzen 7 7700.

PREMIUM CPU
INTEL CORE I9-14900K

The 14900K wins by virtue of its excellent all round performance, even if it is a variant of 12th and 13th Gen models. Whether it's productivity, creativity, or gaming, the i9 14900K is competitive, as long as you keep it cool.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: AMD Ryzen 7 7800X3D
FINALISTS: AMD Ryzen 9 7900, AMD Ryzen 7950X3D, Intel 13900KS, Intel Core i9-14900K, AMD Ryzen 7 7800X3D, AMD Threadripper 7980X, AMD Ryzen 9 7900X3D.

CPU

2023 saw the release of some excellent processors, all the way from the budget end of the market to the high end.

The year started with the launch of Intel's 65W 13th Generation CPUs. There were some gems among them including the excellent Core i5 13400, which remains one of our favourite budget CPUs, but the real star of the show ended up being AMD's value champ, the Ryzen 5 7500F. AMD's gaming prowess was again on show, with Zen 4 models equipped with stacked cache providing excellent gaming performance and power efficiency. In fact, the gaming performance of the Ryzen 7 7800X3D is so good, it can match and beat anything Intel has to offer. Never write off Intel though. Later in the year we saw the launch of the 14th Generation K-series CPUs. Though in most cases they are essentially overclocked 13th Generation chips, they remain competitive options, even if they're power hungry and run hot when presented with heavy loads. At the prosumer and enterprise end of the market, AMD continues to excel, presenting Intel with very tough competition that it cannot yet match. The battle resumes in 2024.

> AMD's gaming prowess was again on show, with Zen 4 models equipped with stacked cache providing excellent gaming performance and power efficiency.

STORAGE

2023 saw the proliferation of PCI Express 5.0 SSDs. The latest and greatest drives are capable of well over 10GB/s of blazing speed, though they do get a bit hot and require some extravagant cooling to run at their full speeds – an ongoing problem that has yet to be addressed.

With USB Type-C connectivity becoming all but ubiquitous, it's become easier than ever to transfer files between your PC, phone or tablet. Manufacturers took the opportunity to expand their portfolios of USB-C storage products.

And if there's one thing we can say with 100% certainty, it's that the humble mechanical hard drive isn't going away any time soon. As long as the amount of data we generate continues to grow, so will the need for large capacity hard drives to hold it all.

> "If there's one thing we can say with 100% certainty, it's that the humble mechanical hard drive isn't going away any time soon. As long as the amount of data we generate continues to grow, so will the need for large capacity hard drives to hold it all."

INTERNAL STORAGE MAKER
CRUCIAL

The ever reliable Crucial offers a full range of storage options, from budget to high end. It led the way for first generation PCIe 5.0 drives and its products are very price competitive in a crowded market.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: MSI, Lexar
FINALISTS: WD, Silicon Power, MSI, Crucial, Kingston, PNY, Seagate, XPG, Lexar, Team Group, Asus.

EXTERNAL STORAGE MAKER
SAMSUNG

SSDs are the future of portable storage and Samsung continues to excel with high performing, reliable and price competitive options including the T9-series portable SSDs.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Synology
FINALISTS: Team Group, WD, Seagate, Samsung, Adata, SanDisk, PNY, LaCie, Synology.

And the winners are...

SYSTEMS

2023 was a massive year for laptop screens and processors adding major benefits to appearance and performance across the board. Apple ditched the MacBook Pro 13-inch for the first time in a decade and released a new MacBook Air 15, we got a novel 18-inch gaming laptop category that really pushed the envelope of desktop replacement devices, and OLED came to budget-conscious laptops that cost as little as $1K.

We also experienced multiple releases of Apple silicon (M2 Ultra, M3 range), 12th and 13th Gen Intel CPUs, the first Intel ARC laptop GPUs, Nvidia's 40 series graphics cards and AMD's Ryzen 7000 and Radeon 6000 series processors all thrown into a season of diverse and advanced laptop launches. The first foldable laptops emerged from Asus, HP and Lenovo, with some promising attributes offered by the new format, but probably not enough to see the category make a mainstream comeback just yet.

The Microsoft Surface Laptop Studio 2 is still the most versatile and useful 2-in-1 for creatives that need a stylus. 20 hour battery life spans on Apple's MacBook Pro and Air range are still the biggest standout feature of laptops in 2023, but both AMD and Intel have worked hard to reclaim performance leads from Apple in the laptop segment. Higher resolution, brighter and more colour accurate screens became standard on pro laptops across the board and GPU performance continued to be heavily influenced by the amount of cooling onboard.

VALUE LAPTOP OR 2-IN-1

ACER SWIFT GO 14

The latest AMD Ryzen or Intel Core processors, a high resolution OLED screen and enough memory and storage to last years; everything you could want for as little as $997 on sale.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Microsoft Surface Laptop Go 3

FINALISTS: Lenovo Legion Pro 5i, Acer Swift Go 14, Asus Zenbook 13 S OLED, Gigabyte G5, Dell G16 7630, Microsoft Surface Laptop Go 3, Apple MacBook Air 15, Framework 13 AMD, Acer Aspire 7, HP Pavilion Aero.

PREMIUM LAPTOP OR 2-IN-1

APPLE MACBOOK PRO (M3)

Apple's M3 processors offer up to 20% performance improvements and the MacBook Pro range is still the only creative Ultrabook that you'd really consider using on battery power alone, making it the 2023 benchmark again.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Asus Vivobook Pro 16X OLED

FINALISTS: Apple MacBook Pro (M3), Asus Vivobook Pro 16X OLED, Dell XPS 13 Plus (9320), Microsoft Surface Laptop Studio 2, HP Spectre X360, Apple MacBook Pro (M2), Lenovo Yoga Slim 9i, Lenovo ThinkPad X1 Carbon Gen 11, Asus ExpertBook B9 OLED, Razer Blade 14.

GAMING LAPTOP

ASUS ROG STRIX SCAR 17

Outstanding components, a 17.6-inch 240Hz QHD panel and the power to push games well over 100fps make the Strix Scar an excellent gaming laptop, but it's also the best value high-end gaming rig of 2023.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Razer Blade 14, Acer Nitro 5

FINALISTS: Asus ROG Strix Scar 17, Razer Blade 14, Acer Nitro 5, Asus ROG Zephyrus M16, Alienware m18, Lenovo Legion Pro 5i (Gen8), HP Victus 16, MSI Stealth 16 Mercedes-AMG Motorsport A13V, Asus ROG Zephyrus G14, Asus ROG Strix Scar 17 (2023), Acer Predator Helios 16.

DESKTOP PC MAKER

APPLE

We saw many beautifully built, balanced and engineered PCs over the course of 2023, but none came close to the level of craftsmanship, innovation and jaw-dropping quality that Apple produces. Case in point is the new iMac. It's beautiful to behold and is the gold standard for a desktop AIO.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Allied, BPCTech, JW Computers

FINALISTS: Mwave, Apple, Allied, Lenovo, Corsair, Alienware, Acer, HP, Dell, Thermaltake, BPCTech, JW, Aftershock, CentreCom, PC Case Gear.

"The first foldable laptops emerged from Asus, HP and Lenovo, with some promising attributes offered by the new format, but probably not enough to see the category make a mainstream comeback just yet."

And the winners are...

COMPONENTS AND PERIPHERALS

This is the single biggest category of the Awards, and is arguably the most important. Whether upgrading a single part, or building from scratch, these are the things you will be thinking about most, and planning most carefully.

Over the course of 2023 we saw decent incremental evolution with many components and peripherals. DDR5 memory became commonplace, and speeds rose and timings fell. Juiced up CPUs and graphics cards demanded better cooling, and better case design, and the companies behind this gear delivered. Monitors and networking, especially, saw big leaps as OLED hit its stride, and prices fell. Wi-Fi 7 entered the game, though Wi-Fi 6 still holds court for the time being. 2023 saw old players enter new arenas, familiar product lines were refined and evolved, and with the covid-induced pricing panic largely behind us, it's a great time to upgrade with some nice new kit.

MEMORY MAKER

G.SKILL

G.Skill's memory covers every segment of the market, from ultra-enthusiast kits to more generic kits for basic systems. No matter how much capacity or speed you need, G.Skill has memory to suit.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Kingston, Teamgroup
FINALISTS: PNY, G.Skill, Team Group, Corsair, Kingston, Adata.

COOLING PRODUCT

LIAN LI UNI FAN TL LCD

Fans are items every PC needs. Then there's the Lian Li Uni fans with built in 1.6-in LCD screens. They look absolutely incredible. You might not need them, but you probably want them.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Corsair iCUE Link Ecosystem
FINALISTS: Corsair iCUE H100i Elite LCD XT, Asus ROG Ryuo III 360, Teamgroup Siren Duo360, Thermaltake TH240 V2 Ultra, Corsair iCUE Link Ecosystem, Lian Li UNI FAN TL LCD, Thermalright Peerless Assassin.

> "Over the course of 2023 we saw decent incremental evolution with many components and peripherals. DDR5 memory became commonplace, and speeds rose and timings fell."

MONITOR

SAMSUNG ODYSSEY OLED G9

Samsung wasn't going to be beaten by Alienware (or Asus) this year, offering a 49-inch ultrawide with a uniquely fast 240Hz refresh rate and 0.03ms response rate in the Double QHD format that is a sweet spot for ultra premium gaming.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: MSI Optix G274QPF-QD
FINALISTS: MSI Optix G274QPF-QD, HyperX Armada 27, Acer Predator X32 FP, MSI 342C QD-OLED, Asus ROG Swift OLED PG27AQDM, AOC Gaming 24G2SP, Dell 24 P2423D, Asrock G34WQ15R2B, Philips Evnia 34M2C8600, Samsung Odyssey OLED G9, Samsung Odyssey Neo G9 G95NC, Asus ROG Swift OLED PG49WCD.

KEYBOARD

LOGITECH G PRO X TKL LIGHTSPEED

A perfect combination of rock solid durability and materials, combined with near-perfect layout and size. We especially like the media controls and volume wheel, and the wireless-plus-Bluetooth functionality that switches with a single button makes it a keyboard that can move from your PC to TV effortlessly.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Asus Rog Strix Scope II 96 Wireless
FINALISTS Ducky One 3 Aura Keyboard, Razer BlackWidow V4 Pro, Logitech G PRO X TKL Lightspeed, Asus Rog Strix Scope II 96 Wireless, Corsair K70 Max.

PC CASE

FRACTAL DESIGN TERRA

The Fractal Terra is a striking and mostly well-thought-out Mini-ITX case. Fractal has once again delivered one of the prettiest cases available – especially if you want a respite from the RGB and aggressive designs that dominate the gaming side of the PC realm.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: MSI MEG Prospect 700R, Nzxt H9 Flow
FINALISTS: TT Ceres, MSI MPG Velox 100P Airflow, Corsair iCUE 4000D RGB Airflow, Asus Prime AP201, Nzxt H9 Flow, MSI MEG Prospect 700R, Thermaltake CTE C750 Air, Be Queit! Shadow Base 800 FX, HYTE Y70 Touch, Fractal Design Terra.

ROUTER

ASUS TUF GAMING AX4200

2023 (eventually) gave us a glimpse of Wi-Fi 7's potential, but Asus' budget TUF Gaming AX4200 wins thanks to its outstanding performance, features and value proposition.

FINALISTS: Asus ROG Rapture GT-AXE16000, Asus ROG Rapture GT6 gaming mesh, MSI RadiX AX6600 WiFi 6 Gaming Router, Asus TUF Gaming AX4200, DrayTek Vigor2135ax Netgear Nighthawk A8000, TP-Link Deco XE200 AX11000, Asus RT-AX1800S.
HIGHLY COMMENDED: MSI RadiX AX6600 WiFi 6 Gaming Router, TP-Link Deco XE200 AX11000

MOUSE

LOGITECH G PRO X SUPERLIGHT 2

The Superlight 2 does the basics, and it does them really, really well. Its cloudlike lightness makes it ideal for fast, intense games, but it's a brilliant pointer for much more than just that. With super-smooth gliding and an excellent sensor, it'll be a fantastic choice for gaming and productivity.

FINALISTS: MSI Clutch GM51 Wireless Gaming Mouse, Benq Zowie EC-CCW, Logitech G PRO X Superlight 2, SteelSeries Aerox 5 wireless, Glorious Model O 2 Wireless, Razer DeathAdder V3.

GAMING HEADSET

AUDEZE MAXWELL

Thanks to its audiophile-grade planar drivers, the Audeze Maxwell sounds fantastic, whether you're gaming, chatting, or listening to music. You won't find a better-sounding gaming headset at (or near) this price point.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: HyperX Cloud Alpha Wireless
FINALISTS: HyperX Cloud III, Razer BlackShark V2 Pro (2023), HyperX Cloud Alpha Wireless, Corsair HS55 Wireless, Audeze Maxwell, Corsair HS80 RGB, JBL Quantum TWS, SteelSeries Arctis Nova Pro, Corsair HS65 Surround Wireless.

And the winners are...

RESELLER

In 2023 resellers were doing their utmost to provide value-for-money offerings in their pre-built system lineups. With inflation hitting hard and graphics card prices still sky-high we saw resellers doing anything and everything to supply systems that provided value for money while still offering decent performance.

This usually manifested in resellers offering systems with previous generation parts in the pursuit of lowering costs. This often meant 12th or even 10th-generation Intel CPUs were used and AM4 socket parts for AMD systems. SSD capacities would often get reduced and be supplemented with larger, cheaper, hard drives. Lower-end motherboard chipsets were also often favoured. It wasn't all like that, if you had the money you certainly could have the latest and greatest of everything, so long as you were happy to tip your wallet out. Given the environment the retailers are working in they adapted well to offer the best value for customers.

This year we'd expect to see this trend continue. And although prices for most PC parts have come off the boil since the pandemic, GPUs remain stubbornly expensive. We hope to see change on that front but at this moment there's no sign of relief yet.

MWAVE

Mwave takes this Award thanks to the absolutely massive range it holds in stock, a well designed site with excellent search filters, along with speedy delivery and, in our personal experience, great service.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: PC Case Gear, Scorptec
FINALISTS: Allied, Austin, BPCtech, Centre Com, Computer Alliance, CPL Online, IJK, JW, Mwave, PC Case Gear, PLE, Scorptec, Umart, MSY.

"With inflation hitting hard and graphics card prices still sky-high we saw resellers doing anything and everything to supply systems that provided value for money while still offering decent performance."

"The great tragedy is that one man, Elon Musk, has the power to cook up a version of global discussion that suits his own agenda and ever-surprising beliefs."

EPIC FAIL

ELON MUSK AND TWITTER/X

Twitter / X was once the world's most important source of breaking news and discussion. It was a playground for silliness and fun, too. It was a place where you could stay on top of your favourite celebrity, sportsperson or musician's latest thoughts. It was also addictive knowing that most of your friends and colleagues would see your own post as soon as it was made, and immediately following that, the engagement as a new conversation was started. It even allowed you to participate in debates, often with famous and important people.

It is no longer any of those things. And, that's a crying shame considering how rapid its downfall has been. Engagement has fallen through the floor, thus removing any personal or commercial incentive to post. Bots run amok, and you can no longer trust what you read. Moderation has become virtually non-existent, and the site is now heavily polluted with hate speech, with extreme political and social viewpoints being boosted into visibility that's impossible to ignore.

And, it's all seemingly by design. The great tragedy is that one man, Elon Musk, has the power to cook up a version of global discussion that suits his own agenda and ever-surprising beliefs, and depressingly, for his own notoriety and ego, too. Sadly, he is wielding that power. Almost every day we see his posts unavoidably pinned to the top of the feed, endorsing hate speech, ridiculing those who dare criticise him, and empowering an undeniably one-sided viewpoint. Musk is now, at best, petty and vindictive, at worst – a barrier to free speech, fair elections and open discussion of critical issues.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Nvidia RTX 4060 Ti 16GB, Samsung 980//990 Pro SSD failures
FINALISTS: Elon Musk and Twitter/X, Nvidia RTX 4060 Ti 8GB, Starfield, Mark Zuckerberg / Threads, Google Play Store (Epic monopoly case loss), Alphacool Apex Stealth, Samsung 980//990 Pro SSD failures (bad firmware), Nvidia RTX 4060 Ti 16GB, Apple walled garden, ChatGPT CEO kerfuffle.

© Jonathan Raa/NurPhoto

And the winners are...

EXCELLENCE

CHATGPT

2023 was indisputably the year of AI. From the gob-smacking first impressions that stunned the world as we toyed with the human-like answers to the most penetrating and absurd questions we could pose, to the speed at which it crafted its information, and the joyous thrill of having it create art that could be both beautiful and wonderfully ridiculous – it seemed like magic.

Then, as the real-world benefits became apparent, it was clear this was a world-changing tech and one that was, incredibly, still in its infancy. As programmers discovered how well it could compile code, as writers found an assistant that was astonishingly usable, as students had a homework and research partner that helped them understand a topic, but also write about it with intelligence and accuracy, reality set in. Nothing would ever be the same again.

ChapGPT is without doubt the poster child for the AI revolution. Now it's on your Windows 11 desktop as Microsoft Copilot, and will be pervasive in many unexpected ways as it evolves. It hasn't all been sunshine and roses – with fundamental change comes a very definite human impact. Jobs will change, and be lost, the economies of many businesses will be upturned, and calls for regulation and sensible use grow louder.

Still, there is no contest. Nothing else came close in 2023 – being the year that AI arrived and shook the world to its foundations.

"ChapGPT is without doubt the poster child for the AI revolution. Now it's on your Windows 11 desktop as Microsoft Copilot, and will be pervasive in many unexpected ways as it evolves."

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Handheld PC gaming, AMD Threadripper 7000 series
FINALISTS: Nvidia DLSS 3.5, Mark Zuckerberg / Threads, ARM, Intel Arc, Apple M3, Handheld PC gaming, ChatGPT, AMD Threadripper, Microsoft Copilot.

THE 2024 AUSTRALIAN PC AWARDS IS PROUDLY PRESENTED BY

SAMSUNG crucial by Micron GIGABYTE ASUS msi AFTERSHOCK G.SKILL Synology SAPPHIRE CORSAIR

And the winners are...

GOLD

MSI

Over the last few years MSI has had a laser-like focus on expanding its product range, and delivering quality and innovation that shows it's clearly going for market domination. It has entered new areas, like storage, monitors, and now, networking, and done so with conviction.

We can easily see that the company is not just testing the waters – and that's what impresses us most of all. MSI typically arrives in a new segment with an extremely high quality product to launch with, then doubles down to expand the range, and with generally no duds. Each new product is genuinely innovative in some way, and the company has resisted the temptation to flood the market with dull me-too clones.

Each new product and segment launch has been impressive. The Spatium SSD range now has over a dozen models. Its monitors are especially interesting and always score highly in our reviews. 2023 saw its first router released, and it came so very close to winning Best Router in these awards.

MSI hasn't been relaxing, it keeps pushing hard and we're now at the point where any new MSI product release is one we sit up and take notice of. It's gone from being a company that would release dozens of motherboards in a single year each with only minor differences, to one where the range is tighter, and the innovation, features and quality have markedly improved. MSI is simply the most exciting company today that delivers across the entire PC components, peripherals and accessories space.

"MSI typically arrives in a new segment with an extremely high quality product to launch with, then doubles down to expand the range, and with generally no duds. Each new product is genuinely innovative in some way, and the company has resisted the temptation to flood the market with dull me-too clones."

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Intel

FINALISTS: Acer, Adata, Aftershock PC, Alienware, Allied, AMD, AOC, Apple, Asrock, Asus, Audeze, Austin, BenQ, BPCtech, Centre Com, Computer Alliance, Corsair, CPL Online, Crucial, DeepCool, Dell, Draytek, Ducky, Dynabook, Fractal Design, Framework, G.Skill, Gigabyte Aorus, Glorious, HP, HyperX, IJK, Intel, JBL, JW, Kingston, LaCie, Leader, Lenovo, Lian Li, Logitech, Microsoft, MSI, MSY, Mwave, Nzxt, PC Case Gear, PLE, PNY, Powercolour, Razer, Samsung, SanDisk, Sapphire, Scorptec, Seagate, SteelSeries, Synology, Teamgroup, Thermalright, TP-Link, Umart, WD, XFX, XPG, Zotac.

MEET THE PCPP CAPTAIN

Under the fearsome PC (that's 'Piratical Company') PowerPlay captain, the PC gaming privateers roam the virtual gaming seas with one goal, to defeat console gamers and loot them of their XP, booty and – crucially – bragging rights

The PC 'Piratical Company' PowerPlay Code

1. No console gamer shall be allowed among the crew, upon pain of death.
2. No crewmember shall PC game for money upon the ship, only for bragging rights.
3. Each crewmember shall keep their mouse and keyboard clean and fit for service.
4. To desert the ship while pwning console gamers shall be punished with death.
5. Quarrels about who is most 1337 at CS2 shall be ended on shore. Gabe Newell adjudicates.
6. Successful raids shall see the XP and looted booty shared equally among the crewmembers.
7. No person shall talk of giving up PC gaming until at least 170,000 console gamers have been defeated.
8. Any crew found to have cheated at online gaming shall be marooned with a Tamagotchi for company.
9. If any crewmember hears "Half-Life 3 confirmed" they are to ignore it, as it surely is a siren's call.
10. No person shall pull a Leeroy Jenkins while gaming upon pain of death.

...UNTIL JUNE 17

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